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"By God, If Wommen Hadde Writen Stories":

A Feminist Glance at the Wife of Bath's Love Versions and Subversions

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Abstract:

This paper on Chaucer's famous/infamous wife of Bath argues that Alisoun, the Wife of Bath is a fableau woman with a difference, flouting the rules of a reductive, misogynistic binary by the flagrant excess of her character, the woman-centered thrust of her tale, and by her bold mockery of male authority stamped in sacred texts. The duplicitous façade of masculinity and monstrosity in which Chaucer embeds her narration, the paper further claims, must have made her tale and her person acceptable to a male audience of those times. Chaucer's complex negotiations

ranging from parody to total subversion, mark him out to be on the side of the feminine rather than against. The resulting portrait is that Alisoun, the wife of bath, emerges not as a fableau women but as a transgressive prototype. In short, Chaucer has written this tale as a woman would have written, given the medieval context of misogynistic perceptions

KEY WORDS-*Jouissance, misogyny, fableau woman, dual iconography, excess, subversion*

The electrifying portrait of Alisoun, the famed Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*, illustrates Chaucer's ingenuity in negotiating the complex dynamics of female identity in a proscriptive society antagonistic to women's autonomy. Composed in a context of strong antifeminist sentiments that were nurtured in an atmosphere of deep-seated misogyny in the medieval church and society, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, through the eponymous heroine, enact womanly way/wiles of interrogating hierarchical norms of society built on a fear of female sexuality, and concurrently reveal an acute awareness, on the part of the artist, of these constraining norms. In a covert space between awareness and its ironic rendering lies the transgressive power of Chaucer's robust narrative. Uttered in a medieval cultural context, where gendered formulations of normative femininity assigned women to spaces of self-annihilation, restraint and silence, Chaucer's narrative reveals the Wife confronting and brimming over the constraints by the distinctive qualities of excess and courage that characterize her speech, attire, attitude, and libido. Speaking out of a cultural matrix that inscribed a simplistic, dual iconography of woman as the virgin/wife and the whore—the normal and the aberrant respectively—Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, emerges as the *fableau* woman with a difference, flouting the rules of a reductive binary by the flagrant excess of her character, the woman-centered thrust of her tale, and by her bold mockery of male authority stamped in religious books. Chaucer makes her tale acceptable to a male audience of the times by a duplicitous façade of masculinity and monstrosity.

In her book, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Elaine Tuttle Hansen sees the Wife as expressing antifeminist sentiments. The fact that old woman in the Wife's tale rewards the rapist knight by giving him the right answer to the queen's question (thereby allowing him to live and escape punishment) makes Hansen infer that the Wife of Bath is "a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the masculine imagination against which she ineffectively and only superficially rebels" (Hansen 35). However, the monstrosity of the Wife can itself be perceived as a duplicitous, feminine subversion. To be accepted by patriarchy in her act of rebellion, she has to show herself as a monstrosity and not as the embodiment of male-ordered feminine because the male-defined woman cannot and should not rebel! Hence it appears that Chaucer is working out his complex negotiations with patriarchy and wooing support for the Wife's subversive acts by inlaying them under the cover of the excessive and the monstrous. She is, in the words of Gail Ashton, "masculine – huge, strong, and aggressive – and feminine, allied to corporeality and to excess" (Ashton 379).

Contrary to Hansen's view, critics like Carolyn Dinshaw believe that "The Wife of Bath's Tale" encodes an oppositional voice to patriarchal discourse. According to Dinshaw, "Chaucer is able to reform and still participate in patriarchal discourse," (116) through his complex characterization of the Wife. Chaucer inscribes a double-voiced tale whose feminist content bypasses the prescriptions of a blatantly misogynist society: "The Wife thus articulates the misogynistic hermeneutic...to make it accommodate the feminine" (Dinshaw 116).

The ubiquitous *fableau* woman in medieval literature, of whom Alisoun may be considered a transgressive prototype, endowed with an insatiable thirst for sex, was, as Hope Phyllis Weissman points out, the literary counterpart of the religious stereotype of the tempting Eve set against the redeeming Mary (113). The many allotropic variations of the stereotype of the *fableau* woman, a cultural manifestation of the othering, reductively dichotomizing process of a predominantly patriarchal attitude, served to justify men's control of women's subjectivities. This patriarchal policing was focused most strongly in the area of the woman's body, and its desires and attempts at expression, leading to a veritable suppression of female *jouissance*. Seen in this context, the depiction of Alisoun offers a radical critique and subversion of social expectations and evaluations of women's self-expressions: for speaking from the space of the *fableau* woman, Alisoun still manages to challenge it. And notwithstanding the narratorial satire

on Alisoun, Chaucer provides a sly space for female self-expression in the character of this exuberant woman.

The Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale does seem to rely on many antifeminist treatises apparently aligning the narrator with a patriarchal perspective.

Consequently, Chaucer's description of the Wife in the *General prologue* is ambiguously satirical, proclaiming her to be what she is not: "[a] good Wif [. . .] OF beside Bathe" (445). As we see in the confessional narrations of her prologue and tale, Alisoun is anything but a good wife! Chaucer also portrays her as a woman with gap-tooth (*GP* 469), a physical feature symptomatic of lechery in medieval theories of physiognomy. The reference to her combative efforts to be first for the church offering also shows her as guilty of aggressive pride. Besides pride, Alisoun's elaborate attire, from hat to shoe, smacks of the so-called "female vice" of vanity. However, Chaucer's emphasis on her exaggerated attire carries another dimension: In her stunningly grand outward appearance, Alisoun flaunts her subversive stance on societal mores. The superfluity of her clothing is but an external analogue of the excess that is the essence of her character—an excess with which she pits herself against the rules and constraints that society dishes out to women. As Margaret Hallissy contends, "…to medieval people, fashion designs were inevitably moral decisions" (119). In the unwritten and written codes of medieval conduct, widows were expected to dress in the simplest manner possible for "sartorial simplicity coexists with virtue" (Hallissy 119-120). However, parading in public places in "coverchiefs ful fine" weighing "ten pound," and "hosen" of "fyn scarlet reed" and "shoes ful moyste and newe," (*GP* 453-57) Alisoun commits "sartorial violations," which, as Hallissy claims, are perhaps "the least of her deviations form the feminine ideal" (129), but nonetheless make a definite statement of rebellion against equating a woman's choice to dress as she pleases with varying degrees of moral laxity. Chaucer makes the wife aware of the crucial cultural value of the clothes as signs of social status and a form of social control before making her subvert these coded/loaded signs of culture:

Thou seyst also, that if we make us gay

With clothing, and with precious array,

That it is peril of oure chastitee (337-339).

Misogynistic utterances like the above mediated through Alisoun's critical voice lose their chauvinistic purport and acquire an ironic edge. Alisoun acknowledges these antifeminist tracts, many of which she has come to know, as she tells the pilgrims, through her fifth husband, Jankyn. Most notable here is St. Jerome's tract, *Adversus Jovianum* that privileged virginity over the sanctioned pleasures of marriage. However, Alisoun takes St. Jerome's premises to argue a spirited defense of sensuality and recurrent marriages, turning the saint on his head, as she ingeniously dispels the need for abstinence for embodied creatures. Though starting her argument by proposing to rely on experience, the greatest authority (1-3), she maneuvers the male "auctoritee" of scholarly writings, kneading the arguments of male-authored texts to advance her own libidinal causes. Aligning herself with the relatively liberal Jovinian in her intelligent manipulation of Biblical passages, she sets up an implicit internecine quarrel of one male "auctoritee" with another, Jovinian against Jerome, and in and through their schism consolidates her argument. Citing the apostle Paul, she contests his statement that "precious array" imperils chastity (340-42), and daringly opposes his injunction extolling simplicity: "After thy text, ne after thy rubriche / I wol not wirche as muchel as a gnat" (346-47). Her intentionally partial misreading of the Pauline injunctions is a superb example of the manipulative rigor of her subversive thesis, as she arrives at a very original interpretation of St. Paul's advice:

I have the power durynge al my lyf

Upon his propre body, and noght he.

Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me;

And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel. (158-61)

One cannot but agree with Helen Cooper's claim that "[t]he Wife of Bath is every antifeminist's nightmare come true" and "her own prologue is a misogynistic male text rewritten form the female point of view, where the men deserve all they get" (149).

Also significant is the way in which Alisoun personalizes the Biblical doctrines as her own private revelation amounting to, what Hallissy succinctly describes as, an "innovation bordering on heresy" (172). Offering a revolutionary, revisionary exegesis of the Bible, she justifies her abounding sexuality and multiple marriages on the basis of Biblical counsels that tell the human race to feed and multiply. Alisoun also deconstructs the clerics' devaluation and condemnation of women's sensual natures, in her scathing observation that it is waning sexual prowess—an inadequacy in the aging clerics—that motivates such a condemnation:

> The Clerk, whan he is oold and may noght do
>
> Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,
>
> Thanne sit he doun and writ in his dotage
>
> That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage. (707-10)

Alisoun also alludes to the hierarchical binary of Mercury (denoting wisdom, learning and the masculine) and Venus (associated with love, sensuality and the feminine) that undergirds a patriarchal paradigm. When she declares that "[e]ch falleth in otheres exaltacioun" (702), this woman of love, a self-confessed devotee of Venus (alas, the lesser planet of the binary formula!) does indeed display a superior, one might say Mercurial, wisdom that takes cognizance of the disastrous consequences of any imbalance. That Chaucer chose to portray the Wife in a manner that interrogates and jeopardizes stable, self-serving, male-privileging binaries testifies to his insightful misgivings about any culture of domination. In lines like the above-quoted, the Wife of Bath challenges on the one hand the hierarchical binary that subordinates women's sexuality to men's spirituality (the clerics' spirituality becomes, in Alisoun's deconstructive analysis, the effect of a lack rather than a celebratory positive), and on the other contests "the male dominated institutions that have in effect 'enchanted' men and women alike into accepting as 'natural' the socially imposed moral, physical and social inferiority of women" (Leicester 238).

Alisoun's daringly idiosyncratic, heterodox glossing of religious texts makes her a rebel. She dispenses with all male-mediation—scholars, theologians, *auctores* and husband—in her

individualistic interpretation of scriptural texts. In so doing, she does blaze a revolutionary path, setting herself up as a preacher/teacher and initiating a "new and dangerous sect, whose principle was that the wife should rule the husband" (Kittredge as qtd. in Hallissy 172-73).

Alongside the strong sexuality which Alisoun exudes as a glossator, and intangibly connected to it, is the emphasis Chaucer places on Alisoun's 'will-fullness.' Undeniably, "'I' is her favorite pronoun." (Hallissy 165) Chaucer's depiction of Alisoun in the prologue is not of a grieving, simple-attired, silent widow, but of a merry tradeswoman, economically independent—possessing "lond and fee," (630) — and rhetorically proficient. Her implacable will, seen in the authority with which she holds a predominantly male audience, like captives, to hear the longest story in *The Canterbury Tales*, is also evident in the way in which she dismisses interruptions to her tale. In everyday speech situations, as Deborah Tannen observes, "men interrupt women" (88). But in Chaucer's exquisite role-reversal, a woman speaks at length and the men listen. When the Pardoner tries to interrupt Alisoun's prologue with his own story, she puts him in her place: "Abide," quod she, "my tale is not begonne" (169). The next time the Pardoner dares to interrupt, he is more solicitous, placating, and shows a willingness to listen to and learn from this woman of experience and to submit to her "will" (184).

"Dame, I wolde praye you, if your will it were"

Seyde this Pardoner, "as ye bigan,

Telle forth your tale. Spareth for no man,

And techeth us yonge men of your pratike." (184-187)

By the end of her prologue, Alisoun asserts that after a checkered marital life of many years and multiple relationships, she has come to possess, in her own words, "maistrie" and "soveraynetee" (818). The wife-beating, scholarly cleric Jankyn is subdued into saying: "Mine owene trewe wif, / Do as thee lust the terme of all thy lif. / Keep thine honour, and eek mine estaat" (819-821). But Chaucer makes it clear that Alisoun is the ultimate master not only in her marital relationships but in any social context involving interactions between men and women. This social "maistrie" is enacted symbolically in the active telling and passive listening by the scandalous Wife and the male pilgrims respectively.

Chaucer also uses the Wife's narrative to show what marriage could mean for a medieval woman: perhaps it was, for many women, nothing more than a business arrangement that institutionalized rape and commodified their bodies. Crucial to such an analysis is the dream that Alisoun is reported to have told Jankyn in her prologue: "And eeke I seyde I mette of him al nyght: / He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright, / And all my bed was verray blood" (577-79). This passage reverberates with the subtext that marriage could be tantamount to rape or murder for a woman; the passage also specularizes the bodily violation of the woman in marriage: "All my bed was verray blood" (579). That "blood bitokenth gold" (581) points to woman's commodification, to the degradation of woman's virginity/sexuality to a piece of property. Maybe as Marshall Leicester suggests, Alisoun's reference to sumptuous blood also signifies "bodily invasion" amounting to "a dream of marriage as assault" (242). Thus, a careful reading of the text suggests that Chaucer slyly brings into this canonical text the subversive notions of what marriage might have felt like for many women of the times.

Besides showing a medieval woman's experience of marriage, Chaucer also foregrounds the sexual nature of Alisoun's psyche in his narrative. Married at forty to the twenty year old Jankyn, she uninhibitedly proclaims in her prologue: "Gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel. / I hadde the prente of Seinte Venus seel" (603-04), showing a remarkable self-knowledge about her sensuality—an awareness that shines through in her bold confession that she loved not by discretion but by her appetites (622-23). The Wife of Bath, as "she exults in the recollection of her fleshly delights," "has [indeed] warmed both hands before the fire of life" (Kittredge 64), and validates a life of self-expression and self-fulfillment, anarchic and wild as it may be. By talking about her sexual relationships to a predominantly male audience, and by her generous sprinkling of wifely, sexual counsel to a group of attentive men, Alisoun shows a remarkable control and courage, unafraid to reveal herself as a sexual being. And through her, Chaucer breaks, in literature, the sexual silences that ordered and repressed medieval women in real life. In thus depicting love and adult sexuality from a woman's point of view, Chaucer gives a strong—maybe eccentric and comical too—voice to women's enforced sexual muting in literature and culture. The medieval woman, oppressed and controlled by the institutions of church, family and marital ownership, is transformed here into an active, vital being,

acknowledging her sexuality and inscribing, in her inimitable style, an evaluation of the then prevalent mores regarding men and women.

As an offshoot of her abounding sexuality, Alisoun is also portrayed as a woman who loves to be out of the patriarchal house of enclosed space. As she declares in her prologue, "[w]e [women] love no man that taketh kepe or charge / Wher that we goon. We wol ben at oure large" (321-22). To be "at large," however, signified a moral instability in medieval patriarchy. But Alisoun is not ashamed of her peregrinations. She is, in the course of her tale, out on a pilgrimage, and at other times she goes out to see the world and indulge in merry gossip:

> Therefore I made my visitaciouns
>
> To vigilies and to processiouns,
>
> To preching eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
>
> To pleyes of miracles, and to marriages (555-58).

In choosing to wander, and in rejecting stasis and enclosure, Alisoun protests against the commodification and confinement of women, and espouses liberation into open spaces, for as Hallissy suggests, women's spatial circumscription goes hand in hand with their objectification: "Valued commodities are tightly enclosed" (99).

> The tale, which Alisoun chooses to tell after her prologue, is primarily woman-centered. Beginning as a story of a certain woman's violation, it ultimately turns the searchlight on what women want most in their lives, "[w]hat thing is it that women moost desiren" (905). It makes the valorous and guilty knight, supreme exemplar of culpable manhood, wander through the forest searching for an answer that might help him better understand women. It forces him to listen to women, just as Alisoun's male audience listens to her prologue and her tale that ascertain her sovereignty. Though apparently we move from Alisoun to (an)other women, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in fact fictionalizes the prologue, and turns out to be an allegory of her life (and perhaps that of many medieval women). It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Alisoun, Proteus-like, is engaged in the process of shape-shifting to become one or the other woman of her tale, victim and victor. It is indeed possible to see the different women in her story as her different alter egos. Like the raped woman, Alisoun,

married at twelve, must have experienced marriage as a kind of violation. Like the old woman who solves the knight's puzzle, she believes that sovereignty is what a woman wants most in her life, and at the time of her latest marriage, could be described as relatively "old." And very much like the old wife, Alisoun is quick-witted, manipulative, determined to be married, and ready to take advantage of a helpless male. The transformation of the hag into a dazzling damsel might signify not only the transformative power of true love, but also Alisoun's own desires to be young, beautiful, and become inviolate again. The dancing girls symbolizing female power and beauty, perhaps, point to the multiplicity of Alison's own infinite yearnings. Disappearing into the forest, they leave in their stead the old woman whom the rapist knight encounters in the forest: "Vanisshed was this daunce, he nyste where. / Ne creature saugh he that bar lif / Save on the grene he saugh sittinge a wif" (986-98). One cannot help but wonder if this movement indicates Alisoun's awareness (as perceived by Chaucer) of the passing of the plural pleasures of her youth, and her acceptance of age and its limitations on her excessively libidinal self. Alisoun, one could sum up, contains all women: the raped maiden, the old wife and the dancing girls. Seen in this light, Alisoun's tale is, indeed, an allegory of her life, a dramatized extension of the themes that Alisoun expounds in her prologue.

Chaucer's subversive telling continues in his sanctioning for Alisoun a space for venting her rage. Most noteworthy in this context is Alisoun's angry prayer at the end of her tale:

And eek I pray Jhesu shorte hir lyves

That wol not be governed by hir wyves.

And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,

God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1261-1264)

Though the raped woman is silent and invisible (we hear no words, see no tears) in the tale, Alisoun, as her spokesperson or her alter ego, may be deemed as expressing *her* rage and that of all women whose lives/liberties have been violated by patriarchal institutions. For after all,

Alisoun is a (physically and psychically) wounded woman, as is made explicit in her moving interrogation: "Who wolde leeve or who wolde suppose / The woe that in myn herte was, and pyne?" (787-88)

The anger, minimal though it may be, that Chaucer sanctions for the Wife in the text testifies to Chaucer's faith in the justifiability of women's fury; for anger, like desire, is a much-denied woman's emotion. Though in the binary logic of patristic cultures, the pathos of emotion belongs to woman, anger and aggression are abrogated by the male, and an angry woman is always looked upon as deviant. Through the depiction of the Wife's anger, subtle though it may be, Chaucer dispels notions of 'the eternal feminine' as embodying angelic sweetness and self-sacrifice. Through the Wife, Chaucer presents a portrait of "the monster woman," the obverse of the society's idealization of the "angelic woman." As Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, many readers tend to perceive the hag in the forest, the ugliest woman ever to be seen-- "A fouler wight there no man devise" (999)—as the externalization of the monstrous in Alisoun (274). In the words of Toril Moi, the monster woman is a woman of will, a woman whose sense of self cannot be extinguished: "The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her" (58). And what a story Alisoun tells! Justifiably, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who applaud Alisoun as a liberated woman and Chaucer himself as a protofeminist, point out that " [t]o be selfless is not to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story [. . .] is really a life of death, a death-in-life"(25).

Weissman is perhaps right in stating that, "the portrait [of the Wife] is in fact a parody of the virtuous Woman (*mulier fortis*) of Proverbs 31 [. . .]" (120). Alisoun may appear as a figure of comedy that one may laugh at and dismiss away. But the facade of comedy can hide deeply insurgent potential. But lurking behind the parody is Chaucer's empathy with the lives of the many medieval women laboring under divisive and repressive dichotomies. And in the carnivalesque atmosphere of parody, Chaucer provides an opportunity for the Wife to contest and puncture official codes of conduct. "Prolix of speech, capacious of dress, unstable of place, disloyal, bold, bossy, brassy, friend to woman, enemy to man, Alisoun is a compendium of female traits, a summa of misogyny" (Hallissy 163). "This sense of the narrative becomes clearer when we consider the Wife to be a textual 'feminine' representation, one constructed within the

parameters of 'masculine discourse'" (Cox 19), the feminine being possible in an ostensibly masculine discourse. However, in the Wife's prologue and tale, Chaucer seems to have sidelined his parodic intentions, and made this "summa of misogyny" strike back at the misogynists by enabling her unorthodoxy and excessive flamboyance find a dominant voice and space. Entrusting the narrative voice to an unconventional woman, and inscribing her desires, fears, and furies, Chaucer succeeds as a brilliant androgynous artist writing *ecriture feminine* (a term used by Helene Cixous for women writing their repressed body), transcending the limitations of his gendered life to write a vibrant woman's life as she herself, perhaps, would have written it. In so doing, Chaucer fulfills the very longing that he infuses into his Wife when he makes her exclaim: "By God, if wommen hadde written stories" (693).

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