

THE WIFE OF BATH

CHAUCER'S AUTHORIAL CONTROL OVER ALISOUN

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Some literature only has a handful of characters through which the author drives the plot. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* has thirty. Twenty-eight are true pilgrims traveling "[from] Engelond to Caunterbury" (l 16), one is a host, and one serves the purpose of a narrator. Eight of them hold religious titles. Three make a living out of defending their country. Three actual have a scholarly education that is not based purely on a religious vocation. Three of these pilgrims are women. Of those three, two are nuns. The other woman, the one who fits into none of these categories, is the Wife of Bath.

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* is arguably one of the most well-known and frequently written about sections in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The *Wife's Prologue, Tale*, and character have attracted critical analysis concerning marriage, religion, morality, ethics, love, sexuality, feminism and female dominance. While some critics may seek to put the *Wife of Bath* into one or a few of these categories, it is not that simple. David Parker of the *Chaucer Review* in "Can We Trust the Wife of Bath" supports this anti-cookie-cutter stance saying that "Alisoun of Bath is not a 'character' in the modern sense at all, but an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude" (90). This quote is fundamental to understanding Alisoun not as a flat, straightforward character, but rather as a representative of a complex struggle between progressive and conservative stances. As explained through the entirety of this paper, the "attitude" which Parker refers to is not Alisoun's attitude.

I believe that Chaucer invented her character to insert his own "attitude" and authority surrounding feminine ideas into the literary world. Because he is in complete control of the female voice in this storyline, his "attitude" becomes the female "attitude". This allows him to explore the contextual limits of what would now be called progressive feminism while also encaging the female voice by never fully allowing it to have ownership of identity he denies Alisoun independence through contradiction and interruption. [fix]

Understanding Chaucer's intentions in creating the Wife's character is essential to explicating the text. I agree with Parker's analysis of Chaucer's intention, however, I do not agree when he pins Alisoun as being "not in harmony but in conflict with [herself]" (98). Since Alisoun is one of the most famous female characters in literature, our interpretation of Chaucer's characterization of her is important to how we view not just Chaucer's work as a whole, but the evolving representation of the female character in literature. Thus, dismissing Alisoun's text as ironic and humorous would do both Chaucer and gender studies a disservice. Therefore, as readers attempt to interpret Alisoun, they often disregard authorship, rhetoric, and close reading of the text in an attempt to bring forth their own modern values. Rigby in "The Wife of Bath" asserts that as appealing as these values may be, they cannot hold true unless they take into consideration every aspect of the identity given to her by Chaucer, not by the reader.¹

Critics of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Prologue* have a double-sided argument concerning a feminist approach to Alisoun. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar label Alisoun as the classic feminist heroine standing strong for female supremacy in a time of heavy misogyny.² In their work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, these scholars argue "Alisoun beats men at their own game" (16). In this critical camp, scholars argue that she is an authority for the female race that convinces her readers of her views. For these critics, Alisoun represents equality in marriage, and the death of male sovereignty. In direct opposition, critic Carolyn Dinshaw in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* interprets Alisoun's character as an antifeminist, greedy and oppressive wife saying, "she mimics the operations of patriarchal discourse"(115) and "she is enacting precisely what patriarchal discourse...says endlessly" (118).^{3,4} My thesis intersects this debate by turning to the authorial relationship between Chaucer and Alisoun revealing a gap in the critical conversation; the internal identity conflict that Parker mentions is not actually a conflict within Alisoun's character but a character weakness that Chaucer cultivates in order to undermine her authority as a woman.

While some may argue that Alisoun discredits herself in her first utterance of a line by saying "Experience, though noon auctoritee" (line 1), this line can easily be reinstated for the benefit of Alisoun by labeling it as an example of antiphrasis, a moment in Chaucer's writing that holds the opposite meaning of what is explicitly in the text. However, I think the most accurate interpretation in this context comes from the footnotes provided by Jill Mann's edition of *The Canterbury Tales* saying that in this context "auctoritee" is translated as "written authority".⁵ Thus, experience is not authority. Authority can only come from books and real authors. This specific word choice implies that Chaucer indeed takes away any authority given to her in her prologue and tale, as he is the one who has written it. By having Alisoun state that she has "noon auctoritee" within the first four words that she utters, Chaucer discretely implants his control in her text from the beginning. This initial contradiction creates the divide between author and character, which is never implicitly stated, giving Chaucer permission to experiment between his characterization of an innovative independent woman and his persistent anti-feminist stance. Chaucer performs this experiment by representing two sides to every perspective a reader could take on Alisoun's character, which results in Alisoun having no real identity, no

integrity and thus “none auctoritee.” She is not as Parker says a character. She is an “attitude.” Chaucer withholds an identity from the one true female voice among the pilgrims, leaving her weak and undermining the possibilities of female sovereignty, feminist readings, and a progressive female existing in the 14th century.

This initial line in Alisoun’s prologue gives way to further interpretation concerning her “Experience”. It is interesting that Chaucer chooses this word because Alisoun has no real experience of being a medieval woman. She actually has never been married or been on any other pilgrimages because she is a character in a book written by a man. One might say this fictional character dilemma exists in every book; however, Chaucer makes the effort to specifically mention her “Experience”, bringing attention, ironically, to the fact that it does not exist. Saying that Alisoun has experience can even imply that Chaucer is confident enough in his writing of her character, that mentioning this “experience” would be accepted by the reader and even heighten Alisoun’s realness. Since a male author represents and crafts the “Experience” held by this medieval female, she has no real experience of being female. Laskaya comments on this tension of a faux experience in *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the ‘Canterbury Tales’* saying “her iconographic conformity stems from the fact that she is a man’s depiction of a female’s challenge to cultural gender prescriptions” (178).

Both Laskaya and Parker mention her “iconography” in their analysis and how essential it is to her character. They use the term “iconography” to explain that symbolically, Alisoun illustrates the conventional medieval female conforming to the will of a man. However, in this case, Laskaya brings light to Chaucer’s biased and seemingly inaccurate character creation. This analysis suggests that Chaucer was not qualified to write such a figure into his work. Furthering this authorial analysis in *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, Carolyn Dinshaw argues, “The Wife is a source of delight for this male author precisely because through her he is able to reform and still to participate in patriarchal discourse; he recuperates the feminine within the solid structure of that discourse” (116). This critique differs from Laskaya’s because Dinshaw accredits Chaucer’s creation of Alisoun to his own satisfaction and pleasure. Her analysis suggests that Chaucer’s intentions with Alisoun were like that between a puppet and a puppet master. In other words, her existence enables him to experiment with discourse at the expense of one of the few female representations in his work. These critics paint Chaucer as having inaccurate, unqualified, cowardly and selfish intentions in his creation of Alisoun. Thus, their analysis confirms Chaucer’s male authorship is a distortion of Alisoun’s “auctoritee” and “experience”.

Using this authorial relationship with Alisoun, Chaucer sets up a series of contradictions that are present throughout her prologue and tale. It seems that when she defines herself in any way, he revokes that definition through both word and action. Alisoun is a seemingly explicable character. On first glance in the *General Prologue* she is at once loud, religious, in control, sexually dominant, the face of female sovereignty, a good housewife, and the wife of five men. But, while Alisoun should be an easy character to grasp, Chaucer sets up a dichotomy in which he contradicts or undermines almost every one of these aforementioned descriptors. Thus, Alisoun is left seeming like one of two things: a bold faced liar or a weak woman who does not have an identity. This is all at the cost of Chaucer experimenting with a strong woman, but retreating back to a traditional female image.

The first example of this dichotomy involves Alisoun’s religious identity. On one hand, she seems to practice, know and believe the common religion of her peers, while on the other hand the most protruding aspects of her character are impossible to align with Christian values. Proving her religiosity, she participated in pilgrimages to various places and “thrice hadde she been at Jerusalem”(463). Pilgrimages were a form of penance at this time, so her intentions to cleanse herself of her sins seem pure. However, she also admits that she likes to witness “lusty folk” who are also seeking penance in hopes that they see her in her attire. She follows the reverent protocol of sewing handkerchiefs to cover her head on Sundays, but the host mentions in the general prologue, “I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound” (line 454). Also, she chooses to wear “hosen of fin scarlet reed” (456) which suggests a provocative, non-conservative approach to Sunday church attire, further implying a lack of reverence and ulterior motives. Moreover, Alisoun feels the need to justify every action in her life in which she goes against scripture. This occurs in her prologue when she states “God bad us for to wexe and multiplie” (line 28), which is a direct quote from Genesis 1:22, “And God blessed them, saying, be fruitful, and multiply” (King James Bible). She goes on to back her position of having multiple husbands saying that King Solomon, Abraham and Jacob all participated in having multiple wives. This attempt at justification proves her familiarity with the Bible and as well as her instinct to confess and validate her actions. Whether or not this comes from a true place of religious intent is impossible to say, but the initial lines of her prologue surely imply it.

But immediately after this, Chaucer contradicts her knowledge of and involvement in religion by creating a woman who the Church considers completely wicked. She is a divorced, overly sexual liar who has been married five times and uses her housewife skills to be provocative and offensive at religious gatherings. It is easy to see how Parker could have read this as simply an internal conflict; however, this is a complete contradiction on a spiritual level in this era and actually implies a weakness in Alisoun’s character. No one’s interiority could be that conflicted. Chaucer creates an unrealistic character in order to mimic and parody the virtue and power of women. Both the church and her own person are appalled by her lack of sexual control, even during religious events. Thus, how can Alisoun hold on to spirituality as her own if such opposing signs are visible by all, discrediting any belief in what she stands for? This is again not an inner conflict as Parker has labeled it, but rather one of Chaucer’s dichotomies that allow him to torture the female voice with religion, something culturally approved of, existing simultaneously with an abundance of sin and guilt, which result in public and self-disapproval.

An example of this disapproval comes from the *The Parson’s Tale*. As a pilgrim accompanying Alisoun on the journey, it would not be odd for The Parson to comment on her behavior specifically. This is especially possible because his turn to speak occurs after Alisoun’s, and it is

common for the pilgrims to comment on each other's opinions and behaviors. In his tale, he specifically condemns lustful people who wear an "outrageous array" and "superfluitee" of clothing to religious establishments (ll 411-31). As aforementioned, Alisoun is known for her church attire because she wears ten-pound headdresses and provocative panty hose to religious events. Chaucer could have easily written Alisoun to wear more reverent attire, but instead, he filled her closet and reputation with things worth chastising. Another option Chaucer had was to allow her to embrace and be embraced by her sexual identity. Alisoun could have served as a model-like hero who wore sexually liberating clothing to provoke feminine pride for her generation of females. Instead, Chaucer rebuked any notion of this progressivism by writing the Parson to reference Alisoun as having reprobate attire worth publicly condemning. Chaucer has not created a person with internal conflict but rather a character externally doomed by his prejudice and experimental dichotomy. He does not allow for this female to stand confident in her wardrobe, sexuality, or faith in this situation. Instead, she is tangled in a contradicting dichotomy created by Chaucer for the probable purposes of entertainment and experimentation with a prejudice that holds back female progression. As a result, Chaucer continuously undermines Alisoun, arguable the only true female voice in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The next dichotomy deals with Alisoun's relationship with her husbands. Having complete control over her husbands' body and soul is a principle, which made Alisoun famous amongst the other pilgrims and within the literary world. However, opposing that aspect of her identity is that both her prologue and tale end in clear female submission coupled with male sovereignty in marriage. The former of these two stances is represented when Alisoun claims, "Upon his flesh, whil that I am his wif/ I have the power during al my life/ Upon his proper body, and nat he" (lines 157-9). She recalls teasing them in bed for money and torturing them with her sexuality so that she had total power over their bodies and marriage. Her confident tone in these lines imply that this control is foundational to her very existence on Earth. It is lines such as these that feminist critics claim female sovereignty and point to Alisoun as one of the first figures of female independence. She claims to have complete authority in this area due to her previous "experience" in other marriages. But it is important to remember this authority's aforementioned analysis as something given to Alisoun when it is convenient or exciting for Chaucer as the male writer. In these moments where she is gifted with authority, progressive experimentation can be seen as the full intention of Chaucer. His intention is most easily visible here due its fantasy like presentation. Here a male author writes for a presumably male audience about an authoritative wife, characterized as being overly sexual, who mandates power over the "flesh" and "body" of her husbands. It is easy to see how this relates to common male sexual fantasy. Also remember that this "experience" is consistently not valid to the reader because Chaucer continues to bring attention to it, parodying that a character such as Alisoun's has not and does not exist, but rather exists as Chaucer's inaccurate creation of a medieval female. But, going back to the fantasy perspective of this passage, "experience" in other marriages could refer to sexual experience, implying that she has acquired skills that further play into male pleasure as they encounter Alisoun's character as both author and reader. Ultimately, Chaucer's other half of this dichotomy trumps Alisoun's sexual pride and female sovereignty through her own submission.

Even with all of her confidence, "experience" and foreknowledge, her fifth husband, Jankyn, manages to take all of this control away from her and holds all the power in their marriage. He beats her regularly and tortures her with stories from the book of "Wicked Wives"⁷, and this is the husband with whom Chaucer wants us to believe Alisoun is actually in love. In reference to the aforementioned critics who support Alisoun's female sovereignty in marriage, this argument loses all credibility when the heroine of her tale ends up, "obey[ing] him in every thing/ That mighte do him plesance or liking" (line 1255-6). Furthermore, returning back to the male fantasy reading of this section would further disprove a feminist reading of her character. In the same way that a male author or reader may see Alisoun's control over male bodies as a fantasy, it is also a threat to their own power and ability to have control. Thus, Chaucer plays into this threat by not only taking Alisoun's authority away completely, but also creating a husband who will literally beat and torture her into a place of submission. To add to this, Chaucer makes this degrading relationship the one relationship that Alisoun enjoys and the one man she actually loves.⁸

This male fantasy reading implies that while female dominance may be sexually satisfying for the man momentarily, the real way to obtain complete male satisfaction is through male dominance and even physical abuse within a marriage. Furthermore, it implies that the time when females are most in love is not in a position of dominance, but rather in a position of submission. By toying with female dominance and Alisoun's power over her husbands at the beginning, yet relinquishing it completely in the end, Chaucer reveals his profound ambivalence. While, Chaucer is comfortable creating a character that embodies feminist ideals, he is not comfortable with releasing that character as one that is accepted by the male community. Furthermore, he seems uncomfortable with this being achieved by a medieval female pilgrim of this era. Exchanging Alisoun's easy-to-grasp progressive female identity for one that ends up submitting to beatings and commands from her husband, Chaucer leaves her weak once again.

As a result of these same beatings, examining her deafness furthers this argument. Her profile in the *General Prologue* merely states that she is "somdel deef" (line 445). At this point, her deafness is mentioned alongside her loudness, sexuality, female sovereignty, and religiosity. One could say that its mentioning could be overlooked as a birth defect or sickness side effect due to the accompanying empowering descriptors. However, halfway through her prologue, the reader learns that her deafness is due to a beating from her most current husband, Jankyn. Chaucer strategically chose such a physical, undeniable, outward sign of injury to serve as a scar to prove her weaknesses. Again referring back to the male fantasy reading, Alisoun's injury can be seen as a mark of male triumph and constant reminder that men have stolen her once-held female authority. Even though she boasts of being strong, Chaucer has insured that she remain defeated, whipped, and marked. Most feminist articles skip over this section of the text. This silence is a point within itself.

On one hand, Alisoun clearly values being young and attractive while on the other hand, Chaucer has written her character to be aging and less attractive. Alisoun speaks fondly of her days of youth as her first marriage took place when she was twelve years old. It is clear that she prioritizes youth and beauty throughout her tale. In her tale, the knight decides to interrupt his journey solely because of his attraction to the beautiful women dancing; he is horribly disgusted by the ugliness of the old hag, and his marriage goes from a terrible obligation to becoming wonderful overnight once his wife turns beautiful and young to make him happy. However, in the *General Prologue* Chaucer describes the Wife as having a bold, red face and being gap-toothed and fat. It is also evident throughout the prologue that her age has caught up to her and she is not as young as she once was. This decline of power from the young and beautiful to the old and ugly is a carefully chosen idea. Chaucer implies that he has control of her weaknesses. He could have easily written Alisoun's character to be in her prime age at a ripe twenty-two years old, more beautiful than any man could have ever dreamed to stumble upon. And if he were trying to embrace fully a progressive feminine instead of just experimenting with it, he probably would have written her as young and vital. But instead he only gifts her with being "Gap-toothed" (GP 1468), having a face that was "reed of hewe" (GP 456), as well as being "somedel deaf" (GP 456) and "olde" (GP 476). As bad as Alisoun's character may want youth and beauty, it can be said that creating a duality and leaving her weak is more important to Chaucer than creating a progressive, strong, and whole image of feminism.

While her complexion, age, and dental issues are not exactly aspects of her identity that she could potentially change, Chaucer also spends time in the *General Prologue* explaining her size saying, "hir hipis large" (l 472). With this emphasis on her weight he furthers her bawdy, battered and old description adding gluttonous to the list. This emphasis leaves room to suggest that he created yet another weakness of self-control. Also, it is telling that he makes the effort to describe her physical appearance as old, unattractive, and fat when he could have just as simply made one of his only female voices slightly more respectable to her peers and acceptable by his male audience by giving her the edge of a more appealing outward representation. Again he intentionally turns a strong woman into a caricature, distorting her image completely. Furthermore, I think what is most interesting about this section is Chaucer's chosen timing. The reader knows that her first marriage was at age twelve and since then she has had four more marriages. Thus, at the time when she claimed the most control and authority in her marriages to the men, she coincidentally also had the most of her beauty and youth. These two qualities that she clearly prioritizes are things that are known to fade with time. For Alisoun, it can be guessed that this fading occurs around the same time that she loses power over her marriage and sexuality. This directly infers that a woman's youth and beauty may give her permission to obtain power and control over a man.

However, as soon as Chaucer encourages a moment of female dominance, he tends to then secure male dominance. Every woman is bound to gradually lose their youth and beauty, thus at that point, Chaucer's writing implies that they no longer obtain the right to maintain control. And at that point, even though the man (Jankyn in this case) is also old and declining in attractiveness, he holds claim to the final authority in the marriage. Thus, according to Chaucer, if a woman is lucky enough to be the only female represented (Alisoun) (who remember, does not really exist and has no "auctoritee"), with youth, beauty, "experience" and independence, and is allowed a moment of control over men, which is granted only through male permission (Chaucer) and stripped of this control by the nearest man (Jankyn) due to her increasing weight, age, and ugliness, then she can finally have love, torture, and beatings to hold onto. This reading again proves Chaucer's intent to explore, empower, and ultimately undermine the female voice for the sake of male pleasure and entertainment, leaving Alisoun, the representative female, weak.

Continuing her need to justify and explain her sexuality, Alisoun spends a significant amount of time discussing virginity. The topic of virginity is Chaucer's next dichotomy. On one hand Alisoun embraces her lack of virginity while simultaneously obsessing over virginity and justifying her actions. Alisoun explains that she was taught that virginity is more perfect than marriage saying, "Virginitee is greet perfeccioun,/ And continence eek with devcioun" (lines 105-106).⁹ This refers to the Christian belief that remaining a virgin is the most perfect for of discipline because it overcomes selfish temptations of the flesh, providing more time to focus on the will of God.

While this entire section is directly addressing virgins, it is also directly addressing those who are not virgins. The King James Bible states in 1 Corinthians 7:9, "But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." This implies that if one does not have the self-control to resist temptations of passion, they should not pollute the marriage bed, but rather get married and have sex in wedlock. Alisoun embraces this scripture to the fullest extent by "giving in" to marriage five times, which could in itself imply five different times where she is weak. Obviously, Alisoun sees this herself, because she understands this commonly taught Christian value. She is aware of the weakness that Chaucer created, which leads to yet another weakness of identity between religion and sexuality.

Furthermore, she spends a lot of time attempting to justify her anti-virgin identity saying things such as "And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe/ Virinitee, thane wherof sholde it growe?" (ll 71-2)¹⁰ and comparing her life to biblical figures who also enjoyed sexual lives. Alisoun tells in her Prologue, "I woot wel Abraham was an holy man,/ And Jacob eek, as fer as evere I kan, And ech of hem hadde wives mo than two" (ll 55-7) Even though this lack of self-control in and of itself is a weakness, there is a greater weakness that exists in this section. Alisoun's tone and defensiveness on the topic shows that she has great respect for the expectations that religion set upon her, enough to confess and defend herself consistently throughout her prologue. It shows her sense of conviction about these actions in her life.

If Chaucer had created her character to not care about what the Church said about her actions and if he had allowed Alisoun to live confidently in her "sin", then there would be nothing more to say. But this is not the case. By giving her one of the longest prologues (and even allowing a man, the Frere, to comment on its length) could be seen as Chaucer allowing for or even requiring all of her justifications and excuses.

This implies that both Chaucer and his audience would not allow for such a woman to get away with female sovereignty and a highly sexual identity without knowing of her guilt and personal awareness of her sins. Either way, Alisoun's obvious insecurity with her life choices reveals an even greater weakness. This female character makes few statements that are not later contradicted by her own narrative, making her also two-faced and a liar. To not even be able to hold a solid decision or stand her ground on a choice she made is a weakness that could be insightful to any gender statement that Chaucer tries to make through the Wife's character.

Chaucer plugs another instance of weakness into this female character through the playful atmosphere of her prologue. Chaucer allows for the Wife's Prologue to be interrupted twice by dialogue from the Pardoner. Primarily, these moments of interruption bring the reader's attention away from the Wife's storytelling and toward Chaucer's authorship by literally having the standing up of a man cut her off. The interruption implies a sense of control and constant focus on Chaucer's point. By disrupting the rhythm of the Wife, Chaucer displays that at any point, he has the supremacy to disturb her story, change her course, and insert his authorial power and viewpoint into the plot. Anytime a dialogue occurs, there is a need for explanation such as "quod she" (169) and "Seide this Pardoner" (line 185), making both the reader and the Wife dependent on Chaucer's voice specifically. This is an important concept to point out because it is yet another moment when Chaucer transfers authority from the Wife, to himself, to the pardoner, back to himself, and then back to the wife so that she may continue. Chaucer's specific word choice from this moment in the prologue furthers the notion that the Wife has less authority than her character likes to imply.

Rather, Chaucer leaves little reminders that his authority is omnipresent. This is evident in the words of the Pardoner in his first interruption that suggests her point has made women, wives, and marriage so unappealing, that he "Yet hadde I levere wedde no wif to-yeere" (line 168). This male mindset undermines the wife by revoking all power from her. Without men wanting to marry her, she loses her power of sex, riches, identity, satisfaction and female sovereignty. While it is obvious that the Wife is not specifically dependent on the Pardoner, in this scene they are both representative of their genders. Thus, Alisoun is dependent on males to marry her, making the Pardoner's comment potentially devastating to her argument and overall identity. Continuing on, his interruption requires Alisoun to defend her right to tell her tale and convince the Pardoner that she is worth listening to, an obvious position of weakness that would not have existed without the male interruption. Later, the Pardoner gives her permission to continue telling her tale and she agrees to continue "sith it may yow like" (line 188). This quote is particularly interesting because it shows a moment of reverence to males, which has not yet been mentioned. Alisoun only agrees to continue speaking because the Pardoner would like her to. Thus, it is implied that if he did not want her to speak, she would have become quiet. Moreover, if this one man had not been interested in what she was saying, Alisoun would have put aside her opinion, her story, and female representation.

In this moment, Chaucer displays just how easily the male voice silences the female voice. This subtle line speaks volumes to Chaucer's attitude towards the female voice and makes it clear that he himself sees it as weak. These interruptions also show Alisoun's awareness of the male perception of her/ the female voice. Furthermore, while she restarts her prologue, she reminds everyone that "min entente nis but for to pleye" (line 192). This can be read as an attempt at an advertisement to regain the interest of her audience in what she has to say, something she would not have had to do if the Pardoner had not interrupted. The content of this quote reveals Alisoun's insecurity as she discredits her own words, saying that they do not have to be taken seriously, but rather, her words are just for entertainment. Again, here is Chaucer's hand. Also, this quote mimics the first time she began her prologue, furthering previous analysis. Both times, Chaucer discredits the trust and intentions surrounding her words.

Yet another interruption occurs at the end of her prologue. The Friar laughs at the Wife's discourse then comments on how long it is. After a bit of an argument between him and the Summoner, the Host says "Lat the woman telle hir tale" (line 851) to which she responds "Al redy, sire... right as yow lest,/ If I have liscence of this worthy frere" (lines 854-5), to which the Friar responds "tel forth, and I wol here" (line 856). This discourse is reflective of the Pardoner's interruption earlier in her prologue. Again, she is cut-off by a man, but this time he laughs at her, adding a tone of disrespect to the interruption. The Host, who is a presumably also a man, must give the floor back to Alisoun, who then specifically asks for permission back from the Friar, who says he is now ready to listen. So much of this dialogue takes power and attention away from Alisoun, leaving her to ask for her rights to continue on as if she needs an actual "liscence" to continue. No other characters, being that they are male, approach their turn to speak in this way. Showing the distinct difference between gender rights implies a weakness surrounding Alisoun while simultaneously empowering the male characters around her.

By having four males penetrate her dialogue, Chaucer makes it seem as though a woman cannot or does not deserve to hold the stage, as if Alisoun cannot be entertaining enough without the interruption or help from a man. Furthering this disrespectful playfulness in her prologue, Chaucer writes Alisoun to lose her place and become distracted while telling her story, especially towards the end when she talks about her last husband. This distractedness implies a lack of intelligence and lack of focus that are an obvious weakness in her storytelling ability, as it chips away at the her strong and confident persona she originally displayed. Moreover, as mentioned, this distractedness occurs surrounding the topic of her last husband, Jankyn. Being the husband that replaced her female sovereignty with male dominance, this distractedness would only further play into the male fantasy reading. Here is a woman who is telling her story, but cannot keep it together when speaking of the husband who has the most control over her. This is presumably because she is insecure and intimidated by him. All of this combined with the Wife's aforementioned tendencies to contradict herself creates a caricature in which the reader has little trust and confidence in.

Alisoun's tale of the hag and the knight are obviously written to parallel Alisoun's life. The tale displays a queen having complete control over the life of a knight due to his own criminality. That control over the knight is then passed on to that of a hag. Throughout the tale, females are seen maintaining control over males, a theme that was also present in the beginning of Alisoun's prologue. Thus, until the last few lines, it seems as though Chaucer's pitch for the progressive female is the prominent idea of the tale. However, it is in its conclusion that Chaucer allows for both female weakness and Alisoun's weakness to find its way back into the narrative. First, rather than embracing the reality of female aging, the hag miraculously becomes beautiful. This aspect of the story defies female reality and discredits the possibility of a handsome knight marrying an old hag. But again, this also plays into the male fantasy reading. After the hag becomes beautiful, the knight is the happiest man in the world.

Instead of empowering an old woman by leaving her in her natural state, Chaucer impractically changes her to satisfy the previously stated desires of the man. This transformation shows first that women are not good enough the way they are, and second gives the male voice permission to determine the outward appearance of a female. Third, when this change happens, the knight no longer perceives their marriage to be an obligation, but instead he is happily married. Alisoun explains in her Tale, "And whan the knight saugh verrailly al this,/ That she so fair was, and so yong therto,/ For joye he hente hire in his armes two" (ll 1250-2). Thus, the beauty is what satisfies him, not her character. Ultimately, aging and beauty are again not things that a woman can change, however, Chaucer gives the male voice permission to change it and expect it so that it may be happy. Fourth, in the same way that Alisoun gave up control of her husband, the reader learns that, "[the hag] obeyed him in everything/ that mighte do him pleasnace or linking." (ll 1255-6). This quote could not more clearly state her trade of female sovereignty for male dominance. It is interesting that in the same way Jankyn the abuser was the man for whom Alisoun was willing to trade her control over men, the rapist knight is the man for whom that the hag is willing to trade her control. Clearly Chaucer is implying that the formula to gain control over an independent woman is to abuse her. He also implies that this abuse is enjoyed and seemingly preferred by women. Not only does this logic paint women as weak, but also desperate and insane.

When Chaucer takes the focus off Alisoun in particular, his dichotomies tend to disappear. He allows the other female characters, in both the form of pilgrims and characters from their tales, to hold true to an identity. However, these identities do not experiment with female independence, strength, or sovereignty. Instead, they conform to the submissive, quiet, and obedient female conventions that Parker refers to as "iconographic". The Prioress' profile in *The General Prologue* is an example of this ironic character. Chaucer spends thirteen lines speaking of her table manners giving examples of these skills saying "Wel koude she carye a morsel and wel kepe/ That no drope new fille upon hir brest" (ll 130-1). While physicians and priests are described as saving and changing lives, being able to not drop a crumb on her breast while eating is the most important and distinguishable thing with which Chaucer chooses to identify her.

Furthermore, it would take a lot to make her seem any more weak than Chaucer does in these same lines. The Prioress is apparently so tender and so full of pity that "She wolde wepe if that she sawe a mous/ Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde" (ll 144-5). These lines paint a weak and fragile portrait on their own; however she seems especially feeble because her portrait is strategically placed after the portrait of the Yeoman where Chaucer lists his "sward", "spere", and "daggere" (ll 112-4). Placing two such juxtaposing profiles one after the other only heightens the weak female image and dominant male image that Chaucer is most comfortable with. Furthermore, by filling her profile with clothing descriptions, proof of table manners, and ability to sing along in church, the Prioress seems useless in comparison to the hard working, educated men that surround her. Chaucer follows a similar pattern for his other female characters, proving Alisoun's exceptionality.

The entirety of this argument is important to understand because Alisoun is arguably the loudest female voice in this time period. While it is notable that Chaucer experimented with female progressivism in small ways, ultimately, Alisoun's character is painted as insane, desperate, weak, unintelligent, worthless, insecure, and submissive while simultaneously empowering male dominance in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.

(Endnotes)

1 Rigby, S.H.. "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women ." *The Chaucer Review* 35.2 (2000): 132-165. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Oct. 2011. Pages 154-7

2 Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984. Page 16

3 Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989. Pages 116- 118.

4 Some critics avoid the feminist approach all together to interpret this text through a post-structuralist and Marxist lens, however their theories are not relevant to this paper.

5 Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Jill Mann. *The Canterbury tales*. London: Penguin, 2005. Print. Page 211.

6 In the Parson's Tale, he speaks specifically about lustful people who wear an "outrageous array" and "superfluitee" of clothing to religious establishments (lines 411-31).

7 The book of "Wicked Wives" is a collection of stories about the most deceitful wives to ever walk the Earth. For example, Eve's first sin is chronicled in detail, blaming her for the fall of mankind.

8 "I trowe I loved him best" (l 513)

9 Which means - A great perfection is virginity

10 Which means – And surely if no seed were ever sown/ From where then would virginity be grown?