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**Twisting Texts and Tales:
The Wyf of Bath's Proto-Feminist Beliefs Shown
through Her Prologue and Tale**

Megan Ames

Geoffrey Chaucer's Wyf of Bath has been a controversial figure since she first appeared in the Wyf of Bath's Prologue and Tale (WB Pro & WBT) in *The Canterbury Tales* (CT) in the 14th century. Scholars cannot agree about how she uses her knowledge of "auctoritee[s]" (WB Pro 1), like Ovid. Some contend that she intelligently twists their words to articulate her proto-feminist beliefs while others believe she foolishly misquotes them. This inadvertently contradicts her beliefs, due to her misunderstanding of the misogynist texts she cites. This confusion is further compounded by Alisoun's tale, which is considered by many critics as contradictory to Alisoun's beliefs about gender roles in relationships. However, I contend that the WBT, compared with its analogues, is a proto-feminist tale that supports Alisoun's beliefs from the WB Pro, demonstrating her ability to twist texts and tales to fit her argument. Understanding how Alisoun "glose[s]" (WBT Pro 119) texts to fit her proto-feminist position concerning gender roles in relationships, as it is elucidated in the WB Pro, is vital to my contention.

The best example of how the Wyf uses her intelligence to twist texts to her liking would be her interpretation of St. Paul's concept of the marriage debt. This concept was set down in medieval canon law, and gave women "equal rights with men in demanding...the act of coition" (Holloway 3). The law was put in place in order to maintain the wife's and husband's marital duty to "satisfy the other's needs" (Good News Bible 1 Cor. 7.3). Alisoun tempers this concept with the assertion that it is possible only if husbands relinquish control to their wives. The Wyf maintains that it is her innate right as a Christian wife to "have the power duryng al [her] lyf / Upon his propre body, and noight he" (WB Pro 158-59). In doing so, the Wyf twists the Pauline ideal that "[a] wife is not the master of her own body, but her husband is; in the same way a husband is not the master of his own body, but the wife is" (1 Cor. 7.4), by leaving out the first half of the verse that detracts from her argument that women should have control in their relationships. The Wyf's

desire for power in her own relationship and belief that power is what all women want lead her to twist the texts she encounters in order to sway the beliefs of the other pilgrims. Her use of canonical texts to support her own beliefs demonstrates Alisoun's ability to cleverly present information to the pilgrims, even if some of that information is taken out of context.

Supporting her belief that states men should not be given ultimate power in relationships, the Wyf proclaims men frequently abuse that power. Focusing on men's jealousy by addressing her old, dead husbands and using them as representative of most husbands and writers of misogynist texts, Alisoun states that wives "love no man that taketh kep or charge / Wher that we goon; we wol ben at oure large" (321-23). She says that women cannot love men who are in charge because these jealous husbands keep women captive. Focusing on jealous husbands stresses the need for women to be the dominant force in relationships, according to the Wyf. These covetous, controlling husbands greatly trouble the Wyf because of their adherence to the principle that "men may nat kepe a castel wal, / It may so longe assailed been overal" (263-64) as justification to keep their wives away from the outside world, in an attempt to keep themselves from being cuckolded. Alisoun pokes fun at jealous husbands who try to control their wives:

Sire olde fool, what helpeth thee to spyen?
Thogh thou preye Argus with his hundred yen
To be my warde-cors, as he kan best,
In feith, he shal nat kepe me but me lest;
Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee! (357-61)

This declaration reveals the futility of men's attempts to prevent their wives from having affairs, because the Wyf asserts that women are intelligent enough to deceive their husbands should they choose to do so. Alisoun's belief in the supremacy of women's intelligence is further demonstrated by her claim that women's "wit [is] yeven [them] in [their] byrthe" (WB Pro 400), making women's intelligence inherent and, thus, assumed in this time to be God-given. Additionally, Alisoun's reference to Argus is reminiscent of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* in which he maintains that women should deceive their husbands by learning from Ovid how to be successful in their deception "[t]hough as many keep watch as Argus has eyes" (3.618). Here, Alisoun displays her God-given intelligence by interpreting Ovid's supposedly misogynist text in a way that

strengthens her position about women's dominance in relationships.

Ovid's influence on the WB Pro appears again, and more directly, during Alisoun and Jankyn's argument about Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (685), which contains "Ovides Art" (680) among its other misogynist texts. Disgusted with the way her sex is portrayed in Jankyn's book, the Wyf astutely notes that

if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (693-96)

Here, Alisoun directly challenges the men who use these "auctoritees" to discuss gender roles in a misogynist way by pointing out the lack of female input into these stories they use and the lack of stories about men's evils. Ovid is the source of at least one of the tales that disgusts the Wyf. The tale that repulses her is that of Pasiphae, who "rejoiced to become the leman of the [white] bull" (Ovid 1.295). Pasiphae stands out from the rest of the contemptible women on Jankyn's list that he recites to Alisoun "nyght and day" (WB Pro 669) because of Alisoun's strong negative reaction to her story: "Fy! Spek namoore—it is a grisly thyng— / Of hir horrible lust and hir likyng" (735-36). Helen Cooper incorrectly diminishes the importance of Ovid to the text as a whole, and more specifically to the tale of Pasiphae, because she asserts that Ovid's work was "probably known to Chaucer only through the *Roman de la rose*" (142). While I do not wish to diminish the importance of the *Roman de la rose*, I am compelled to point out that the *Roman de la rose* draws heavily on Ovid's writings. Thus my focus on Ovid derives more from Peter Allen and Richard Hoffman's observations that "Ovid is the ultimate source" (Hoffman 134). Ovid's presence in the WB Pro is a crucial part of Chaucer's text and should be consulted in order to gain a full understanding of the Wyf's use of it as a source.

Many critics contend that Alisoun does not understand the misogynist ideas from Ovid's texts, which is why they believe she uses them erroneously to support her beliefs. In the fourteenth century, Ovid was believed to be a misogynist, due to the literal readings of his works "for their moral and philosophical truths" (Allen 57). The truth is, as Michael Calabrese states, "Ovid is not essentially an antifeminist

author" (85), nor were his texts intended to be antifeminist. Medieval people saw his texts in that way, though, and incorrectly interpreted and translated them into the misogynist category. By using only a medieval, moralized understanding of Ovid's texts, we would be forced to discount the satirical spirit in which they were written. Allen contends that Andreas Capellanus' *De amore*, just like Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* on which Andreas' work is closely modeled (77), presents itself "amoral[ly]" (75), with the intention that "the reader must share the responsibility for understanding it and supplying any moral meaning it may have" (75-76). However, this theory of interpretation was not encouraged in medieval times for men, let alone women who "were shut out of [the Church's] modes of education and literacy" (Holloway 7), and generally not formally educated at home. Yet, the Wyf cleverly does what she is not supposed to do according to medieval custom and interprets the texts in her own way, just as Ovid would have wanted.

Women's lack of formal, book-oriented knowledge in the fourteenth century did not bar them from learning through experience. Though the Wyf has more knowledge of texts than most women in her position, she is more reliable as an authority on relationships and marriage because of her extensive experience in that field. Verifying her marital experience, Alisoun affirms, "sith I twelve yeer was of age, / Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve, / Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve" (WB Pro 4-6). The Wyf also describes her belief that "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (1-3), a proclamation with which Ovid would readily agree. This sentiment is echoed in Capellanus' Book 3 "when he notes that no one can be fully educated about love and its pains without being schooled by *magistra experientia* (Mistress Experience)" (Allen 76). These similarities in thought are what led Calabrese to draw parallels between the Wyf and Ovid by describing them as "master[s] of 'experience'" (81). Each uses personal experiences to form generalizations about the behaviors of men and women playing the game of love.

Alisoun's attitudes toward sex are also remarkably comparable to those of Ovid. The Wyf's focus on sex "for [the] ese" (WB Pro 127) of the two partners is mostly drawn from her sexual experiences. Throughout the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid

describes sex as a mutual act in which the man should “[l]et the woman feel love’s act, unstrung to the very depths of her frame” in order to “let that act delight both alike” (173). Both sexual authorities think of sex not as a method of procreation, but as a source of pleasure. Ovid and Alisoun use their undeniably similar attitudes about sex to advise their respective audiences in how to act when dealing with the opposite sex.

Recognizing that Ovid and Alisoun share many of the same opinions about relationships is important because it shows that she does understand his texts and fittingly uses them to support her beliefs. Alisoun can and does alter texts to fit her proto-feminist beliefs, though her important alterations of Ovid are, in reality, only alterations to how his texts were perceived in medieval society. Therefore, the Wyf “gloses” his texts correctly to support her positions, showing herself to be more intelligent than many scholars of her time who counted him among the misogynists of the day. The intelligence she displays directly counters her detractors’ arguments that she does not understand the sources from which she quotes. However, the problem of the fit of Alisoun’s tale to her proto-feminist ideas still remains.

Many critics, like Cooper and Thomas Van, feel that “[t]he Wyf’s [hag’s] decision to be both beautiful and faithful to her husband once he gives her the choice of doing either seems to contradict what she told him earlier, that is, that women want ‘maistre’” (Van 190). I do not see the story in this way, but rather as a proto-feminist tale in which women hold all of the vital positions of power. There is a distinct focus on women’s roles in teaching the knight, and the main female character, the hag, determines if the knight is worthy enough for her. The hag’s decision to be “bothe fair and good” (WBT 1241) is a reward for the knight who has not only learned “what thyng [it is] that wommen moost desiren” (905), but has also learned to apply this newfound knowledge to his relationship with the hag. Though it appears that the hag gives up her sovereignty to her husband, she actually only commits herself to a seemingly equal partnership in her marriage, though she could still control her husband if she wished. While this idea might seem speculative, one need only compare the WBT with its *Loathly Lady* analogues to see how probable this viewpoint is. There are two main analogues to the WBT, which are extremely similar: “The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for

Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure,” and “The Marriage of Sir Gawaine.” While these tales are all variations on the Loathly Lady tales, there is a great deal of important variation between them.

The integrity of the knight changes between the analogues and the WBT, which affects the reason why the main character must learn what women desire most. The “Weddyng” and the “Marriage” are centered on Sir Gawain, a well-known virtuous character of Arthurian romance, and his fidelity to King Arthur. In the “Weddyng,” Arthur meets a “quyant grome” (50) named Syr Gromer-Somer Jour who demands that Arthur return and “shewe [Gromer-Somer] att thy comyng whate wemen love best, / in feld and town” (91). Similarly, in the “Marriage,” Arthur meets a Baron who demands that Arthur “bring [him] word what thing it is / That a woman will most desire” (12-13). In these two versions, it is for King Arthur that Gawain attempts to find the answers to these two identical questions and has nothing to do with any dastardly actions on his part, unlike the WBT in which the knight’s actions are the sole reason why the question must be answered. In the analogues Gawain nobly attempts to help his king by asking everyone he finds the question in an attempt to reach some kind of consensus.

Although the “Weddyng” and the “Marriage” are extremely similar up to this point, they are distinguished from each other here. In the “Marriage,” Gawain chooses to kiss and marry the hag out of “his exemplary courtesy and his desire to honor Arthur’s [rash] promise” (“Marriage” 385 n. 5) that she could marry one of his knights. Gawain acts honorably because it seems that none of the other knights are willing to fulfill their king’s promise. In the “Weddyng,” Arthur at least only promises to “do [his] labour / In savyng of [his] lyfe to make itt secur; / To Gawen woll I make my mone” (294-96), instead of promising the hag that a knight will take her hand in marriage. In this version, Gawain agrees to wed Dame Ragnell, the hag, saying that “[f]or [Arthur’s] love I woll nott spare” (371); here he is actively attempting to save the king, unlike the “Marriage” in which he seems to be simply forced into it. The two tales show Gawain to be, as readers expect upon reading his name, chivalrous, but to a slightly different extent in each one. Regardless of this distinction, whether he was somewhat

pushed into marriage with the hag or freely chose it, Gawain is still able to pass the test that is put before him in these tales.

While the WBT is also set at the court of Arthur, there is no mention of Gawain at all. Instead, the WBT begins with an otherwise unnamed “lusty bachelor” (883) who, upon spotting a maid, “[b]y verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed” (888). Because of this act he “shoulde han lost his heed” (892), but in an unusual move, King Arthur “yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille, / To chese whether she wolde hym save or spile” (897-98), thus turning over his power to the women of the court. The queene, with the consultation of her “other ladyes” (894), gives the knight the same task that Arthur is given in the analogues. However, there is a dramatic difference in the task in this story, because the knight must find out the answer to the question in order to save his own life. Also, the knight gives the hag “[his] trouthe” (1013) in order to learn the answer to the queen’s question without knowing what he must do in return, making this is an act of selfishness not sacrifice. By making the main male character a selfish rapist helping himself as opposed to a loyal knight helping his king, Alisoun shifts focus from the men in the tale to the women in the tale.

The role that women play in the tale varies between the WBT and the two analogues. In the “Weddyng,” the “Marriage,” and the WBT, the only women characters are Gaynour and Genever and the queene, respectively, and the hag, who appears in all. Gaynour appears in the “Weddyng” only to lament Gawain’s marriage to Dame Ragnell. Similarly, Genever is only in the “Marriage,” at the beginning when she is described as a “bride soe bright of blee” (4). Conversely, the queen has a very active role in the WBT. It is she who convinces Arthur not to kill the knight and who sits “as a justise” (1028) when the knight comes before her to answer her question. At this time, “many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe... / Assembled been, his answer for to heere” (1026-29); notably, no men are described as being present in the court at that time. As Susan Carter astutely noted, “The Wyf thus briskly usurps the male prerogative of justice, redistributes it to the women of the court, and puts the knights of the court in the shadows off the edge of the narrative, the spot usually reserved for females” (335). With this role reversal, the Wyf highlights her belief that women have superior intelligence by placing the queene at the head of the

medieval legal system. By doing so, Alisoun makes the queen an active presence within the story unlike the pretty, mindless drone queens of the analogues. The way in which the Wyf twists the tales effectively communicates her proto-feminist beliefs.

Much like the queen characters in the different tales, the hag characters vary a great deal, changing the meanings of the tales. The “Weddyng” says that the hag Dame Ragnell “was shapen by nygramancy, / With [her] stepdame” (691-92). And just as in the “Weddyng,” the hag in the “Marriage” says,

My father was an old knight,
And yett it chanced soe
That he marryed a younge lady
That brought me to this woe
She witched me. (175-79)

These characters’ lack of control over their situation displays them as weak and helpless women who need rescuing from a knight like Sir Gawain. Conversely, Alisoun does not mention the kind of magic that the hag in the WBT possesses. The Wyf simply implies that the hag turns into a beautiful, faithful woman of her own volition. I agree with Kathryn McKinley, who states that the hag “rewards [the knight] by causing her own transformation” (365). He is rewarded because he has finally demonstrated his understanding of the lessons she has taught him about women.

The answer to the principal question asked throughout the different versions of these Loathly Lady tales is that “[w]ommen desiren to have sovereynetee” (WBT 1038). While this is at first just the answer to the riddle that the knight needs to keep himself alive, he soon adopts this principle. As Edward Vasta correctly maintains, unlike the husbands of the different analogues, “Chaucer renders the husband enlightened by the Loathly Lady’s sermon on spiritual equality” (405). When the knight applies his newfound knowledge to his own wife by granting the hag sovereignty to make her own decision about her physical appearance and fidelity, he is handsomely rewarded.

What bothers many critics about the fit of tale and teller is the section in which the hag, after turning into a beautiful woman, seems to relinquish her sovereignty back to her husband:

And she obeyed hym in every thyng

That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.
And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parfit joye. (1255-58)

However, this does not mean that the wife must obey him, but merely that she chooses to do so. As such a strong character, it is highly unlikely that the wife would actually give up full sovereignty to her husband. Instead, what takes place at this juncture is that

once the woman has been granted
sovereignty she refrains from exercising it,
and this suggests that it is primarily a tool
for achieving feminine independence within
marriage so that more satisfactory relations
between the sexes can have a chance to
develop. (Leicester 173)

In this way, women are allowed to form their own identities by limiting their husbands' control and thereby create a type of equality between them as partners. Most importantly, this description of the knight and the hag's relationship in the WBT is extremely reminiscent of Alisoun's relationship with Jankyn. After Jankyn was afraid he had killed Alisoun, "[he] yaf [her] the bridel in [her] hond, / To han the governance of hous and lond" (WB Pro 813-14), and Alisoun insists that "[a]fter that day [they] hadden never debaat" (822). Alisoun clearly shows that she believes that wives desire sovereignty and should have the power in relationships, but she never states that this means one cannot obey their husband, so long as that is what the wife wants and the wife retains ultimate control over the relationship.

Ultimately, the WBT is one in which a male is educated by a series of women in order to become a better man and husband by understanding what women desire. This proto-feminist tale fits in perfectly with Alisoun's proto-feminist beliefs about men's and women's roles in relationships. Her ability to twist auctoritees and to interpret them more correctly than scholars of her time, lends itself perfectly to her tale, which she constructs using the Loathly Lady tales, to create a theme that is appropriate for her way of life.

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