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Undergraduate

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The Beginning of Feminist Literature

The first women who began this feminist movement may not have been successful, but their contributions are still considered significant. Two women who have been noted as significant figures in the feminist movement in literature are The Wife, Alisoun in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, written by Chaucer during the fourteenth century, and Lady Mary Wroth, the author of *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, which was published in the seventeenth century, where she create a female character in her own likeness, named Pamphilia. In their own ways, these two women each defy the norms of their time on how a lady should conduct oneself and prove Laurel Ulrich's statement, "well-behaved women rarely make history." The actions they take lead the way for other women and express the true desires that women tend to share. They give perspective into what was expected of women during the time of their existence, what things were driving women to be different or make change, and the ways women were not supposed to be acting. A reflection of Wroth can be drawn from Pamphilia, who ignores the issues of silence, chastity, obedience. Wroth writes the real thoughts a woman has, as well as the life she endures. Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, displays that she is also a woman of Pamphilia's stature in the sense that abiding by society's rules is not something that all women can comply with. The fact that each of these women do not fit the stereotype of their time brings the two under the same light. Although they have their differences, Alisoun and Mary Wroth express and explain the minds of women who are constantly searching for their own identities without the influence of men in each of their tales. They are able to break the traditional roles of women and gain their identities and feminist freedom sexually, textually, and subliminally through the characters in their stories and the descriptions of the lives they lived as a woman. As pioneers of feminism in the field of literature, they create a stronger image of the female and express many of the views that are still present today.

Before comparing the Wife of Bath and Lady Mary Wroth, there are a few things that need to be clarified in order to maintain the legitimacy of the argument. First, the fact that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is written by a male makes it seem as though Alisoun is not a good representation of a feminist because it negates the idea of feminism that the woman can be successful without the help of a man. However, despite being written by Chaucer, there are many factors that play into the representation of Alisoun that make her a positive female. For him to write this particular story from a female perspective means that he must have had insight on the

thoughts and viewpoint of women. The tale does not give the notion of masculinity through the female role. Instead, the tale gives an extraordinary account of a woman who has lived an eccentric life. Another reason why this story can be accountable is by looking at the complete account of the Alisoun and taking a different approach to the authorship.

Chaucer may have written the work, but the Wife is the one who tells her story; her prologue, which is twice as long as her story, is a long description of her way of life. She is making these statements as an independent woman, not a girl who timidly follows the orders of the men around her. This essay focuses on the idea that Alisoun is a character in the real world, through which Chaucer chooses to express his ideas of a real, rising woman.

Second, Lady Mary Wroth was not a normal woman living in the seventeenth century because of what she was born into. Her mother was a wealthy Welsh heiress while her father was the first earl of Leicester, automatically putting Mary into the higher classes at the time. She was able to attend school and learn rich skill in the arts such as literature and music. She eventually even became part of Queen Anne's circle of friends as one who appreciated and was educated in literature. The fact that she was not an average woman in the first place can incline that she did not know the true feelings of a woman because she had so many luxuries. However, she still behaved scandalously, having two illegitimate children after her husband's death, and still faced ridicule because of her choice of action as a woman. It is because of her stature she is able to write about the deep feelings of women and things that conflicted the minds of females. As stated in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the reality that, "writing by a woman from this period is a triumph over nearly impossible odds," makes her work even more valuable because she is paving the road for other women writers (549). The accomplishment of having a piece of writing published by any woman is a triumph in the masculine society she lives in. She was still oppressed as a woman and desired to gain her independence from men, for which she conveyed through her prose.

Finally, these two stories are written about 250 years apart, Chaucer having died long before Wroth, making the comparison seem too weak because of the distance. Having known this was written a while before

her time, Wroth with her womanly writing abilities, realizes the opportunity for a woman to give a first hand account on the oppression of the female has finally come. She disguises herself in her writing so to not make it completely obvious her story has connection to her own life. It is in this way she able to write freely about how she feels behind the cover of her book, revealing that it is still not time for women to completely break the chains society has placed on them.

With these clarifications made, the way Alisoun and Wroth gained sexual freedom through their stories becomes pertinent. Alisoun is an interesting storyteller because she introduces herself and her life to others for quite some time before she ever tells her tale. It is in the prologue that she openly reveals through her experiences, that she is a sexually free woman. The most obvious way in which she has gained sexual freedom is through her background in marriage, having had five different husbands. During this time, it was extremely unconventional to have more than one husband, making five shocking. It does not bother Alisoun however, because she gained experience from the marriages, reinforcing her sexual freedom. From the start of her prologue, Alisoun is explicitly open about sex. She thinks having sex is beneficial to the human mind and soul. It may seem very appalling, but she justifies it by stating, “God bad us for to wexe and multiplie:/ that gentil text can I wel understonde,” (Chaucer l. 28-29). This sexual approach from a woman is unheard of. She continues to add to the bizarre behavior by admitting that she uses her sexuality to gain from her husbands.

Alisoun does not work or have a job, and therefore uses the fact that she is a woman to get the things she needs in life. She barter with her husbands for her necessities and expenses by using her sexuality. This makes her, “sexuality as capitalistic as her trade,” affirms Sheila Delany in her article, *Sexual Economics, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, and The Book of Margery Kempe* (71). Her experiences have enabled her to realize what weakens the male and she uses this knowledge to her advantage. It is one of the first times in literature where a woman is using her physicality to manipulate others into giving her what she desires. She either accuses them of some unfaithful act or teases them in bed without giving complete satisfaction until they agree to give her money. Alisoun is content with the woman she is and proud that she uses her sexual power to gain

compliance from her lovers. Her sexual freedom comes from this way of life she embraces, whether it be marrying five times or using her sexuality, which inevitably strengthens her identity and image as a feminist.

Lady Mary Wroth is also a great example of a woman who has gained sexual freedom in surprisingly similar ways as Alisoun. Wroth was married only once and was left a widow after her husband's death. Interestingly, Wroth began an affair with her cousin, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, showing that she had a lighthearted view about sex and relationships as well. To make the romance even more appalling, she bore two illegitimate children with him broadcasting that her concerns do not include the thoughts of others around her. She had the courage to continue to live her life the way she freely desired and did not submit to the social expectations surrounding her. Wroth did, however, lose her status in the high courts and discontinued to receive invitations from the queen's circle. So, she chose to release her emotions through composition, "offer [ing] late proof that erotic sonnet writing was not entirely neglected," states Siobhan Keenan in her book, *Renaissance Literature*, giving Wroth the claim to producing one of the first arousing romances (166). Her writing is one of the first noted works of women, indirectly freeing her sexually because without her scandalous actions, her inspiration would have never come and her beautiful prose would have never been produced. Wroth lived by her own morals that developed as she was discovering her identity, which ultimately reinforced her image as a feminist.

These two women also gained a huge amount of their identities and feminist freedom through their storytelling because it allowed true expression of themselves and personality. Alisoun acquires her feminist freedom through writing and revises the traditional roles of women by presenting an alternate perspective where the woman is in charge. As a narrator, Alsioun's account is interesting because it takes her an incredibly long time to get to her actual tale. She chooses to tell the story of her life beforehand in the prologue. This prologue details her sexual experiences, numerous marriages, and her motivations for conducting herself in these untraditional female ways. Her life is important for people to understand before hearing her story because it enhances the message that is given at the end of the tale. The story is about a knight who has mistreated a woman. For his punishment the queen allowed him only one year to discover what women want most in the world and re-

turn with an answer or he will lose his head. When the knight is brought to the king, “the queen and othere ladies mo/ So longe prayeden the king of frace, Til he his lif him graunted in the place/ And yaf him to the queene, al at hir will,” (Chaucer l. 900-3). It is interesting to note that the king in the story gives his power of punishment to the queen, showing an obvious inversion of roles. The king is obedient to his wife’s advice on how to handle the situation of the naughty knight, whereas usually it is the king that makes the decisions of his court. This new power over men is gained in literature, giving textual freedom to the author and the character. It is also notable that the request requires the man to question the desires of women, bringing to light an issue that has never been addressed and disregarded as unnecessary knowledge. This reveals the ignorance of man because they pay no attention the fact that women have desires and feelings that are equal to man. After searching without luck, the knight is at the end of his year and does not have an answer, until he meets an old woman. He surrenders to the woman’s request to pledge himself to her in order for the answer that will save his life. Once again, the man is giving in to the woman’s orders because he is left with no other choice. These two instances that are written in the tale are extremely important because they show an alternate perspective where the woman is in charge. This textual twist is the way in which Alisoun obtains her feminist freedom through written work and revises the traditional roles of women.

Lady Mary Wroth is an accomplished woman because of her writing capabilities that allowed her to creatively create a complete sonnet sequence and an original prose romance. She was the first of all English-women to achieve this recognition, adding to her identity as a woman of potential and capability. Having attained this acknowledgement, she is without a doubt an influential feminist because she had the strength to write what she wanted without restraint, consequentially encouraging other women to have the audacity to expose the thoughts contained in their minds. Through her text, Wroth “alters generic conventions in order to represent the problematics of female subjectivity through the voice of a woman,” states Naomi Miller in her analysis, *Mary Wroth, The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* (154). Her writing expression is slightly different than the norm because she is a woman choosing to freely communicate the difficulties a woman faces voicing her actual thoughts and opinions. Using her skills in writing, she proclaims what many ladies were thinking and finds peace within her own love life ordeal. Wroth also encourages woman to do the same through her

skillful way of choosing to tell her story and opinions through fictional characters, which are actually representations of people in her life.

Wroth decides to express herself through the character Princess Pamphilia, who voices the feelings of Wroth, saddened by the actions of her lover. She describes love by writing, “Pamphilia went alone, for she not enjoying her love, lov’d to be alone, as she was alone in perfect and unfortunate loving,” (Wroth 64). Although she tried to conceal her deepest emotions about the scenes that played in her life by changing the story and the speaker, Wroth was unable to hide the distinct connections to the actual people in her life. It is clear that Wroth is referring to her cousin-lover in this part because she was unable to have an openly approved relationship with him and was left to concealing her love for him to herself. It is in this way that Wroth also gains her feminine freedom through the text that she writes because she is expressing the genuine thoughts a woman has. This is a very rare thing to find at the time because women did not have the complete freedom to write or speak as they pleased, for they were to be looked at and praised for their beauty and talent, not for their opinions and passions. She is leading women by example by writing *Urania*, encouraging them to not only obtain a skill that was found rarely in women, but also to freely express their thoughts through their artistry.

Both Alisoun and Lady Wroth used their skill of storytelling to express their feministic views sexually and textually, where subliminal points that strengthen their identities as women are also unveiled. Alisoun tells a tale that completely revolves around the desires of women, immediately making it obvious that the story is different than many because it is flipping the roles of man and woman. The queen is in charge of the sentencing of man and gives him a task that focuses on what women want, something that is not really considered in any situation at the time. Alisoun is subliminally bringing up the fact that men are not as smart and on point as they make themselves out to be. Just like the knight, men during the Middle Ages disregarded what women thought and believed sexual game and activity is what filled their minds. Alisoun brings this to light and makes the man actually consider what the female is thinking as he is in search for the true aspirations of all women. He recites his answer to the queen by saying, “Wommen desire to have soverinetee/ As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,” (Chaucer l. 1044-1045). While the knight is just joyous that he will not lose his head,

the first appearance of reversing the positions of male and female are addressed by him declaring this answer. It seems obvious that this is the desire of all women, but the fact that this was written in the Middle Ages and was the first development of a strong, female character enhances the idea that this message of sovereignty over men was not something that men pondered. Also, it supports the notion that men are not as smart as they think or appear to be, for it took the knight an entire year and pledging his life to an old woman for him to find the answer. These subliminal messages of women being in power and men not being bright are the way in which Alisoun breaks the mold of the traditional woman and uncovers the first feminist ideas.

Wroth's characters send subliminal messages about the way a woman lives her life, while including a feminist perspective of men. Her characters are important to recognize in this way because they are actual representations of the life she sees around her and are giving a rendition of the time and actual cultural norms. She also takes the role-inversion approach in the relationship between Amphilanthus and Pamphilia. Amusingly, Amphilanthus' name means "lover of two," describing his relationship between Pamphilia and whoever else. This leads Pamphilia to be deeply saddened, but she does not blame herself for being unworthy in any way because she knows that she does no wrong in the way that she loves or acts towards him. When describing her situation to Antissia, she explains, "love is onely to be gained by love equally bestowed, the giver, and receiver reciprocally liberall, else it is no love; nor can this be, but where affections meete; and that we must not all expect nor can it reasonably bee demanded, " (Wroth 94). She is not a typical woman by thinking this way because usually, the male has the right to choose which lady he desires and the woman must play along with his game, rather than mutual dedication and desire. Instead, she places the responsibility of their relationship between them in his hands, something a man did not really consider, making him adhere to her trust in order to be her true love. This subliminally gives the man a different duty as he must become mature and learn fidelity in order to get the love that he wants, whereas typically, the woman is the seducer, the one adheres to the male desire and develops the relationship between two people. It is also showing that men are not the smartest in every way and have much more to learn than they think, especially because they can acquire the knowledge from a woman. Lady Mary Wroth speaks through Pamphilia, revealing the truest thoughts a woman has about love, as well as what she thinks the man still needs to learn. The feminist thoughts of her time become appar-

ent through the character she identifies with as the image of a traditional woman is broken through Pamphilia's declaration.

Alisoun and Lady Mary Wroth are two women in literature who may have not known it at the time, but have stories that have become some of the first influences in the feminist movement. They had the courage to speak what they believed, while keeping in mind the thoughts of all women who feel the same way. Alisoun, the main character in Chaucer's, *The Wife Of Bath's Tale*, is an outspoken, sexual woman who is bold enough to be completely honest about the type of woman she is, revealing the strength that women can have. Lady Mary Wroth a lucky, literate woman, writes *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, retelling her own life and opinions through the characters in her story, particularly Pamphilia for herself. In their own ways of storytelling, each of these women defy the norms of the society they live in and lead the way for other women to express their deepest desires and perspectives. They give a different interpretation from the male writers of what was expected of women, what was driving women to be unusually autonomous and generate change, and the ways that were considered bad conduct for women. Abiding by society's rules for woman, such as being chaste, silent, and obedient, is something that neither Wroth for Alisoun express as important and choose to not comply with. They each have their differences, but both women express and explain the thoughts of woman who are continuously searching for their own identities, excluding the influence of men. Both are able to violate the traditional roles of women and gain their identities and feminist freedom sexually, textually, and subliminally through the characters in their stories and the descriptions of the lives they lived as women.

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