Alisoun's Language: Body, Text and Glossing in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"

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Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" follows "The Knight's Tale," creating a confrontation between the authoritative written language of tradition and the "disruptive, outrageous, radical" voice of the Miller.[1] The Miller's own tale acts out this confrontation between the sanctioned language of the courtly love tradition and the voices of those it attempts to silence within the structure of a humorous and bawdy fabliau. According to Robert E. Lewis, much of a fabliau's humor "comes from the juxtaposition of the courtly and artificial language on the one hand (spoken by a non-courtly character) and the colloquial, natural, realistic language . . . on the other" (252).[2] This description nearly fits the humorous exchanges between Absolon and Alisoun in "The Miller's Tale." The carnival of the Miller's tale, while interrupted by Absolon's use of what M. M. Bakhtin terms authoritative or monological discourse, is also augmented by the Miller's parody of Absolon's use of "courtly and artificial language."[3] Absolon, a non-courtly parish clerk with courtly pretensions, appropriates the authoritative language of the courtly lover in order to seduce Alisoun without recognizing that the controlling social context is not a courtly one. When briefly given voice, Alisoun, believing she is engaged in a dialogue, uses direct "realistic language" in an attempt to dissuade him. The language she uses, however, is the "internally persuasive word that is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society" (Bakhtin, 342). Absolon does not acknowledge her language; from his position of "authority" he "glosses" her language to fit his own courtly love code of behavior.[4]

In the discourse of late medieval England, Robert W. Hanning explains, people could be both the grammatical and literal object of "glosynge": "People thus 'glosed' are reduced to the status of texts that the wiley glossator can 'explain' (i.e., control) as he pleases."[5] Absolon's courtly gloss of Alisoun is an attempt to explain and control her, and his use of monological discourse, the word of the father, to gloss Alisoun reduces her to a text by admitting no dialogue with "the Other." Moreover, Alisoun is not only the Other in Bakhtin's theory of "heteroglossia," but also in the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir states that "[woman] appears essentially to the male as a sexual being . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and . . . She is the Other."[6] As the Other, Alisoun's words are divorced from power and her body is subject to the interpretation and mediation of the men who primarily view her as a sexual being and want to control her sexuality. Prior to glossing her words, therefore, Absolon has made her body his text, and he has already glossed her as the appropriate object of his love longings. The word of the father, "that has been operating and turning out its 'truth' for centuries" (249), as Hélène Cixous explains, drives women away from their bodies as violently as from language.[7] Alisoun's own voice, muted by the word of the father, is not powerful enough to overturn the language imposed upon her body. She must use her body to create a new "language" to overturn Absolon's courtly glossing. Alisoun must "put herself into the text," Absolon's text, "by her own movement" (Cixous 245).[8] The extent to which the sexual, social and political economy is disrupted by Alisoun's introduction of her body into Absolon's gloss of the courtly lady is dramatized by his decision to use the hot coulter against her. Absolon must defend the courtly discourse from which he gains his identity. He has access to power through the use of the discourse that supports what Foucault termed the " 'general politics' of truth." Absolon appropriates the language of courtly love, one of the "types of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true" in order to gain "the status of those who are charged with saying what is true."[9] More than a humorous juxtaposition of languages, "The Miller's Tale" contains a serious discussion of the use of language to control others through enforced interpretations. More specifically, it exposes the use of male discourse to interpret and control women's discourse and bodies.

Alisoun is both the product and object of a male discourse that has maintained power over women by separating women from both their bodies and language. In the tradition of medieval clerical seduction poems, poems written by and for men, from which Alisoun's sexuality is appropriated, women are drastically removed from their bodies and voices. The Miller constructs her sexuality by borrowing from a tradition that constructs female sexuality as available to male interpretation. Her name, Alisoun, is used for women from the Wife of Bathe, "a parody of female lust" (Hanning, 48), to the seduced girl in the medieval lyric "Jolly Jankyn."[10] The storytelling layers of Chaucer, the narrator, and the Miller create Alisoun from the literary tradition of the clerics, just as Hanning says Alisoun of Bathe "exists as a literary creation of men, a system of texts and glosses" (48).[11] Alisoun of Bathe, aware of her status as a text that "Men may devyne and glosen up and doun" (26), turns to the techniques of glossing and her own experience to show that "the authoritative texts of the glossing tradition are linked from the start with malice toward women and deserve no great authority as direct formulations of the truth" (Knapp, 143). Frances and Joseph Gies suggest in their history, *Women in the Middle Ages,* that the character of the Wife of Bathe alludes to the existence of medieval women who recognized and protested male misogyny (58), such as Christine de Pizan who "was an eloquent but lonely feminist voice in the fourteenth century" (12).[12] The Wife of Bathe, with her glossing of authoritative texts and arguments for experience, is a fictional precursor of the historical Christine who in *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405 wonders

> how it happened that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior . . . Thinking deeply about these matters, I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman and, similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes, who had graciously told me of their most private and intimate thoughts, hoping that I could judge impartially and in good conscience whether the testimony of so many notable men could be true. To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women.[13]

Christine uses the traditional techniques of glossing to reread Boccaccio, Dante and the *Roman de La Rose,* positioning herself, states Maureen Quilligan, "within discourse in such a way as to reproduce in her text a female authority that, although it repli-

cated in many elements the prevailing master discourse about femaleness, also contended with it and instated a difference that took on the hard outlines of an established subjectivity."[14] The Gies, Quilligan and Richards all discuss Christine or her text as "feminist," concerned with the image, status and suffering of women. When glossing men's history of women and "rebuilding" women's history by building the City of Ladies with virtuous women of all classes upon the direction of three female authorities, Christine locates the center of change for women in their ability to take control of the discourse.

Christine, an educated French courtier, had the power and the voice to participate in the debate over medieval texts and circulate her work. Chaucer's creation, Alisoun of Bathe, unlike Christine and her virtuous women, enacts a personal revision of misogynist texts by physically attacking a misogynist book and her husband and then telling her story to an audience within the *Tales* to explain the effects and implications of patriarchal glossing of women. The Miller's Alisoun, in the last textual layer as a character in a tale within the *Tales,* is not given a voice to protest the several layers of patriarchal interpretation being performed upon her. Furthermore, John, Nicholas and Absolon reduce Alisoun to the "status" of a text, each glossing her body according to his own needs, desires and interpretive strategies. Glossing the body becomes a glossing of sexuality, as de Beauvoir, Cixous and Nelly Furman demonstrate. Furman explains that while the "body is a concrete, observable object . . . within a sign system, [it] is a social signifier. While sex is an anatomical fact, sexuality is culturally devised."[15] Creating Alisoun's sexuality, the Miller gives a sensual description of her body "gent and smal" and dresses her from head to toe in sumptuous cloth and rich detail (3234).[16] She wears a "ceynt . . . barred al of silk, / A barmclooth as whit as morne milk / Upon her lendes" (3235-37). She has a "likerous ye" (3244), and "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth" (3261). His point of view establishes her as a text to be glossed:

> In al this world, to seken up and doun,
> There nys no man so wys that koude thenche
> So gay a popelote or swich a wenche.
> (3252-54)

Alisoun is an object for men to gaze on, gloss and obtain. She is at the same time a "lovable young woman" and a "wanton

woman," as "wenche" could mean in Chaucer's day.[17] The Miller sums up the two possible glosses saying she is a woman " . . . for any Lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (3269-70). The social class of the man, or the class to which he aspires, determines the way in which he glosses Alisoun's sexuality.

John, Nicholas and Absolon all gloss Alisoun's sexuality based on their own identity and social position. John marries her for the status of having an attractive, young wife, and not for "simylitude"; worried about her faithfulness, believing she is "wylde and yong," and afraid he will be a "cokewold," he wants to keep her "narwe in cage" (3224-6). Nicholas, the "poure scoler" (3190), performs the role of a seducing clerk. In confirmation of the Miller's glossing of Alisoun's sexuality, the seduction scene with Nicholas and Alisoun is bawdy and physical: "[He] caughte hire by the queynte / . . . And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones" (3276-79). This success of a physical approach resembles that described by the "woman" narrator of the male poet's lyric "Jack, The Nimble Holy-Water Clerk."

> Wan ic to his chambur com, doun he me sette,
> From hym mytte y nat go wan we were mette— . . .
>
> He prikede and he pransede, nold he neuer lynne.
> It was [th]e murgust nyt [th]at euer y cam ynne—
> (28-33)

Even though she is being physically controlled by Jack, she says she enjoys her sexual experience with him as the Miller explains Alisoun does with Nicholas. Within this narrative structure, the "woman" narrator's expression of sexual enjoyment absolves the men of any wrongdoing in using force. In *The Book of the City of Ladies,* Christine is "troubled and grieved when men argue that many women want to be raped and that it does not bother them at all to be raped by men even when they verbally protest," and Lady Rectitude answers that women "take absolutely no pleasure in being raped" (160-61). Christine de Pizan tried to rewrite the myth that Susan Griffin explains in *Rape: The Politics of Consciousness*; the male "myth about the nature of female sexuality is that all women secretly want to be raped."[18] A male believer in this myth, while he might not forcibly rape a woman, enjoys hearing about it "as if rape confirms that enormous sexual potency which he secretly knows to be his own" (7). The cleric reinforces a myth

about his own sexuality by appropriating women's bodies and voices. Alisoun, her sexuality borrowed from the clerical seduction lyric, is similarly divorced from her body and language. When, after the seduction scene, the Miller describes Alisoun as preoccupied by her looks and sends her off to church, saying

> This goode wyf wente on an haliday;
> Hir forheed shoon as bright as any day,
> So was it wasshen whan she leet hir werk.
> (3309-11)

a medieval listener might very well have expected Alisoun to meet with a clerk on her "haliday," like Alisoun in "Jolly Jankyn" and the girl in "The Servant Girl's Holiday." They would have expected the clerk to be like Nicholas or Jolly Jankyn, but instead they are presented with the "courtly" clerk Absolon. This unexpected contrast augments the fabliau humor, while allowing Chaucer to examine the development of Absolon's manipulative gloss and Alisoun's response.

Alisoun is a text, her sexuality defined in accordance with the patriarchal tradition of the clerical seduction poems. Chaucer's "wiley glossator" Absolon, however, aspires to the courtly virtues of a lover expressed in medieval English lyrics like "A Wayle Whyt," "When the Nightingale Sings" and "Complaint to a Pitiless Mistress." He defines himself through his use of courtly language gaining the voice of authority. Absolon's monological reading glosses over the sexual description and social position of Alisoun, reinforcing his myth about his own sexuality and social class. The Miller describes Absolon's courtly self-image and his courtly attempts to seduce Alisoun. Absolon serenades her at her chamber window in a courtly manner with a courtly language.

> "Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,
> I praye you that ye wol rewe on me."
> (3361-62)

He suffers, asks for mercy, and pledges to be her servant. In "Complaint to a Pitiless Mistress" the courtly lover vows to be his lady's man even if she does not have have mercy on him.

> Mercy me graunt of [th]at I me compleyne,
> To yow my lyfes soueraigne plesauns
> And ese your seruaunt of the importabel peyne,
> That I suffre in your obeysauns.
> (1-4)

In the courtly love poem tradition, the "pitiless" lady is an unattainable, powerful woman. The "servant" equates his lady with the Virgin Mary, mixing the languages of religion and eroticism. Like the Virgin Mary in "Edi Beo Thu, Heuene Quene," and unlike the seduced girls of the clerical seduction poems, the ladies feel "ne stighte . . . ne prighte / In side, in lende" (53-54).[19] While the seduced girls' sexuality is fabricated for male enjoyment, the courtly lovers deny their ladies their sexuality by equating their ladies with Mary and infusing the religious ideal of the virgin birth, thereby keeping their "immense bodily territories . . . under seal" (Cixous, 250). Absolon imposes courtly discourse upon Alisoun to make her conform to the image of the courtly lady. By making her the object of his "love longyngs," he reinforces his own language and self-image by reducing Alisoun to a reflection dependent on his flattery and discourse for her own identity. Absolon is the "wiley glossator" whose desire to control Alisoun is exposed by the failure of his reading as he tries to define Alisoun's sexuality through the language of courtly love.

Absolon appropriates the language of courtly love to gain power over Alisoun's sexuality and to gain power by using the language of authority. He borrows the monological language of courtly texts to gain the status of that language, but his ability to use it is unsure, in part due to the disparity between his status in his own social context and the status of the text he uses. The Miller explains that Absolon continues wooing in courtly fashion.

> Fro day to day this joly Absolon,
> So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon.
> He waketh al the nyght and al the day;
> He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay;
> He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,
> And swoor he wolde been hir owene page.
> (3371-76)

Even though Absolon's "complaint" can be seen as burlesque, he is still clearly using courtly language in order to elicit from Alisoun a lover's response. Raymond Tripp, Jr. explains that the "vain, affected, fastidious, squeamish, and vulgar" Absolon's "wretchedly amateur and crude" attempts at seduction show that he is "a most disingenuous young man."[20] This appearance of disingenuousness is the effect of his inexpert imposition of courtly language and sexual identity on Alisoun and his willingness to try other methods of seduction; for example, " . . . he profred meede / For some folk wol ben wonnen for richesse, / And somme for

strokes, and somme for gentillesse" (3380-82). While these other attempts are evidence of disingenuousness, his discourse imitates the language of courtly love. Absolon trusts courtly language to help him seduce Alisoun and gain power over her, but it leads him to misread Alisoun and her responses.

Absolon's use of an authoritative gloss reduces Alisoun to an object, text and Other by not allowing dialogue. Any language she speaks will not be internally persuasive for Absolon. He will gloss what she says as having the " 'single meaning' that authoritative language imposes" (Bakhtin, 343). When he appears at her window a second time, Absolon woos her with his version of courtly language.

> "Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,
> That for youre love I swete ther I go.
> No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;
> I moorne as doth a lamb after the tete
> Y-wis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge
> That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge;
> I may not ete na moore than a mayde."
> (3701-3707)

Alisoun is not persuaded, and her response is anything but courtly.

> "Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool," she sayde,
> "As help me God, it wol nat be 'com pa me.'
> I love another—and elles I were to blame—
> Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon!"
> (121-25)

Absolon, however, still responds as a courtly lover because Alisoun's language is not backed by authority. When a woman speaks, "her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine" (Cixous, 251). Absolon's language is static, unable to admit alternative meanings. And, in the courtly tradition, "The easy attainment of love makes it of little value, difficulty of attainment makes it prized." A "no" is a "yes" in the politics of seduction and rape, Griffin explains. Absolon glosses Alisoun's response to fit his courtly love language and continues to press for a kiss.

Just as Hanning claims Chaucer's Wife of Bathe is "a human 'text' struggling against the restrictive, negative gloss that others have sought to impose upon her and upon women in general" (44-45), Alisoun is a text struggling against the restrictive glosses a poetic genre and Absolon have imposed on her. Since her body

becomes a text glossed by men who control language and discourse, Alisoun's own speech cannot overrule Absolon's reading of her body. She must "write" her self, create herself as her own text by using her body to interrupt and change Absolon's reading of her. Since as Cixous argues it is only by reclaiming their bodies that women will gain a voice, it is only by changing his perception, his reading of her body, with her body that Alisoun is able to gain any voice. Writing her own body is "[a]n act . . . marked by . . . seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history," and, literally, "his story," as she thrusts her body into his reading of her, "which has always been based on her suppression" (Cixous, 250). Therefore, "at the wyndow out she putte hir hole, / And Absolon . . . / . . . with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers" (3732-35). Alisoun's action disrupts the symbolic function of Absolon's courtly language, destroying Absolon's way of reading himself, Alisoun and the world. Alisoun's action is a "linguistic intervention," which Furman claims "ruptures accepted (acceptable) discursive practices" that construct "the social subject . . . Through disruption of the symbolic function of language, we are able to give expression to the repressed, or to detect traces of repression" (74). The disruption of Absolon's language exposes the repression inherent in his glossing. Predicated on the repression of Alisoun's sexuality as the courtly love object, his former language no longer makes sense once she expresses her sexuality. Alisoun's action "profanes" his language; she has taken in vain "a name that must not be taken in vain" (Bakhtin, 343). Bakhtin explains that "authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it" (344). Without the status of the language of power, whose status as a *prior, acknowledged* discourse is reduced to the status of a past language, a *relic,* Absolon loses control of the discourse. By "taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus," Alisoun has stepped out of the symbolic and out of "the snare of silence" (Cixous, 251). Without Alisoun in the silent location of the symbolic chaste lady and object of courtly love, Absolon can no longer proclaim himself the lover. While trying to control Alisoun by making her dependent on his image of her, Absolon only traps himself, while she resists the snare of his language.

When his access to power and status through the use of the dis-

course of courtly love is lost when Alisoun misdirects his kiss, and his thoughts immediately turn toward revenge: "I shal thee quyte." (3746). As Tripp explains, in Absolon "love meets its most subtle and dangerous enemy . . . the ego and its vanity, which, because it exists only as a self-image, cannot brook the slightest crack in the mirror . . . After Absolon has been 'insulted and injured,' precisely where he is most vulnerable—he is after all 'somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous,'—his passion for Alisoun evaporates and sours into violence" (211). Absolon is most vulnerable in his control of language because his hold on the courtly language of power is so tenuous. That is why he is "somdeel squaymnous" of any "speche" that would run counter to the language he has chosen for himself. By using her body to produce subversive "speche," Alisoun takes the power of discourse away from him.

To regain control of the discourse and restore his self-image, Absolon must turn toward violence. Chaucer has already hinted at the latent violence which the courtly love tradition sanctions and disguises.

> I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,
> And he a cat, he wolde her hente anon.
> (3346-47)

The lust and desire expressed here, and its accompanying desire to conquer, is hidden behind the manipulative purpose of the courtly lover's language. When Absolon's reading of himself and the world is destroyed by Alisoun's rebellious body, his only choice to reorder his world is to gain control of Alisoun's body through violence and redomesticate it. He must punish her for her transgression, for her breach of what he understands as the social and sexual contract. Therefore, he chooses to reclaim her body as a text he can gloss through branding and torture.

Using Foucault's theories from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Laurie Finke explains in "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision" that in the Middle Ages "torture was not regarded simply as a form of punishment . . . [but that] . . . The marking of the victim's body signifies the power that punishes."[21] As Foucault explains, "torture forms part of a ritual . . . It must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy . . . In the 'excesses' of torture, a whole economy of power is invested."[22] In order to regain power over Alisoun,

Absolon attempts to use the ritual of branding. He tries to mark her body to bring her back within his semiotic system. Since glossing Alisoun with the language of courtly love is not powerful enough to control her, he chooses a more powerful symbol to gloss her in a way that will visibly show his control over her. Not able to "inscribe" his meaning on her body through language, he attempts to inscribe his gloss upon her physically. Now, however, his gloss must change if his courtly language is to be reestablished as a source of power. As Hanning states, the glossator imposes "identity on others by means of transmitted authorities," letting them conform to the stereotype or the counter-stereotypes, "and being attacked . . . in the latter case . . . When we 'gloss' people, we make them mean for us what we want them to and can thus use them either to satisfy our needs, if they accept our self-aggrandizing interpretation of them, or to justify our fears and hatreds, if they do not" (49). Since Alisoun is no longer confirming his own self-image by letting him interpret her accordingly, then he can justify his fear and hatred of female sexuality, implied by his prior repression of it and confirmed by his reaction to her body, by punishing her. In this case, for Absolon, if she is not the lady on the pedestal, then she is a whore. He wants to brand her a whore by torturing her body where it has been rebellious; he must refute its language where it has spoken. His ability to mark her body will signify his position as the ruler of discourse. He therefore borrows the hot coulter and returns to Alisoun in order to restore meaning to his courtly language and his identity.

Since the punishment ends up burning Nicholas, which is more appropriate as an act of revenge between rivals, and causing the humorous downfall of John, its original intent is often overlooked. It is at this point, however, that Chaucer's fabliau strays from the bawdy and humorous carnival of dialogical language revealing the use of authoritative language to gloss people and gain power over them. Specifically, it exposes the use of male textual traditions, "a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated . . . with the mystifying charms of fiction . . . where woman has never her turn to speak" (Cixous, 249), to interpret and control women, their bodies and their language. Throughout the many layers of discourse in "The Miller's Tale," the men interpret Alisoun in ways to empower themselves. As the object of men's desire and rhetoric, her language is powerless and her

body is the text. Like the Wife of Bathe, Alisoun attacks a system of glossing being performed upon her that completely reduces her to the status of a text. Since her body becomes the text, she uses her body to speak out against Absolon's glossing. Alisoun reintroduces her body into the gloss of the courtly lady, exposing the gloss for what it is: a manipulative and dehumanizing attempt to control women and their sexuality through interpretation. Alisoun's reaffirmation of her own body destroys Absolon's gloss and his own courtly self-image. He turns to violence to regain his control and power over her by inscribing the "sign" of his language upon her body. He must forcefully label her action in a way that will help him restore his self-image and his position as the ruler of discourse. In kissing Alisoun's "ers," Absolon does not just suffer an affront to his ego. He loses all the signs of courtly love which creates his identity and establishes his control over male discourse. Even though Absolon does not brand her, his decision to use the hot coulter against her shows the desperation he feels when Alisoun destroys his ability to control discourse by asserting her own gloss of her body's language.

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NOTES

1 See Martin B. Shichtman, "Medieval Literature and the Contemporary Critical Theory, a Symposium: Introduction," *PQ* 67 (1988): 403-7, for a discussion of the dialogue occurring between the Knight and the Miller's disparate discourses in the context of medieval society.

2 Robert E. Lewis, "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale,' " *Modern Philology* 79 (February 1982): 241-55.

3 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (U. of Texas Press, 1981). Bakhtin explains that the authoritative word (religious, political, moral, etc.) was established in the past, and placed at what Derrida would call the center of the structure of language and is, therefore, "hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic language)" (Bakhtin, 342-43). Absolon appropriates the power of the word of the fathers through his use of the courtly love tradition.

4 See Peggy A. Knapp's essay "Robyn The Miller's Thrifty Work," *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature,* ed. Julian N.

Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse U. Press, 1989), pp. 294-308, for an application of M. M. Bakhtin to Chaucer through her discussion of the Miller's dialogical discourse and its juxtaposition with the Knight's monological discourse. Her argument that Robyn replaces the knight's authoritative discourse with an internally persuasive one parallels my argument that Alisoun disrupts Absolon's appropriation of "the Knight's" authoritative discourse.

5 In " 'I Shall Find It in a Maner Glose': Versions of Textual Harassment in Medieval Literature," *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers,* ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Cornell U. Press, 1987), pp. 27-50, Robert W. Hanning explains that "Chaucer exploits the lexical and conceptual ambiguities of glossing . . . Through two of his most memorable characters, Criseyde and the Wife of Bath, Chaucer capitalizes poetically upon the extension of meaning whereby 'glosynge,' comes to signify deceitful cajolery or flattery. The grammatical result of this development is that people can now be, literally, the object of the verb 'to gloss.' This fact becomes in Chaucer's hands a potent symbol for the dehumanization inherent in the practice of deceit and manipulation" (40).

6 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1974), p. xix. In her article "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History,* ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), Sarah Beckwith addresses the multidefinitions of this term as it is used in various theories "from de Beauvoir's existentialist categorisation to Lacan's psychoanalytic reformulation. The term has been redeployed by French feminist theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray, who use a version of Derrida to deconstruct the sexual hierarchies they see in all binary oppositions. This sense . . . carries the meaning of the Other as a fantasy, because there is no stable site of meaning over against which a stable identity can differentiate itself" (Notes 54).

7 In "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1 (Summer 1976), rpt. in *New French Feminisms,* ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), pp. 245-64, Hélène Cixous, concerned with the history of the silencing of women and their future outside the snare of silence, locates women's speech and writing at the center of their attempt to regain their bodies, desires and thoughts from a phallocentric tradition. In this paper I am interested in the metaphors of body, text and glossing to discuss Alisoun's attempt to enter a dialogue with Absolon, for which Cixous' theories are appropriate. Luce Irigaray, however, uses the analogy of the mirror, which as Sarah Beckwith explains, is also appropriate for medieval literature; "For Luce Irigaray, in her *Speculum de l'autre femme,* the mirroring function of the woman which allows man to reflect and be reflected in his own image operates through the very means by which his subjectivity is structured, linguistically and socially, at the level of the production of meaning itself. Such a process can be seen at work in the medieval ideology of courtly love in which the feudal aristocracy construct woman as the other (the static, voiceless lady of fin amor)" (35). As the idealized object of his longings, Alisoun functions as a mirror for Absolon's self. Julia Kristeva also uses the image of the mirror; in *Tales of Love,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia U. Press, 1987), Kristeva explains that when experiencing love the self "projects and glorifies itself, or else shatters into pieces and is engulfed, when it admires itself in the mirror of an idealized Other" (6). In this text which considers images and codes of love, Kristeva examines the conflation of the Virgin Mary and the Lady at "the focal point of men's desires and aspirations" (245) in the "courtly utterance act" (287) and love code of the twelfth century French troubadours.

8 For Irigaray the "movement" of the "mystic language or discourse" of medieval women has been "the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly . . . Where . . . the poorest in science and the most ignorant were the most eloquent, the richest in revelations" (191-92).

9 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 72-73.

10 All references to medieval lyrics can be found in *Medieval English Literature,* ed. Thomas J. Garbaty (Lexington: Heath, 1984), unless otherwise noted.

11 See also Peggy Knapp's study of Alisoun of Bathe's discussion of herself as a text glossed by men in "Wandrynge by the Weye: On Alisoun and Augustine," *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers,* ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Cornell U. PressP, 1987), pp. 142-57.

12 Frances and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition,* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1980).

13 E. Jeffrey Richards, trans., *The Book of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan* (New York: Persea, 1982), p. 4. Richards argues in his *Notes on the Text* that "Christine demonstrates her fluent control of women's history by skillfully interweaving references to misogynist attacks leveled by classical writers, counter examples taken from early Christian history, and to noble ladies of the recent past" (261).

14 Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cite des Dames, (Cornell U. Press, 1991), p. 5-6.

15 Nelly Furman, "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?" *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism,* ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 73.

16 *The Riverside Chaucer,* 3rd. ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 68-77.

17 *Chaucer's Major Poetry,* ed. Albert C. Baugh (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 293.

18 Susan Griffin, *Rape: The Politics of Consciousness,* 3rd. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 6.

19 See lyrics such as "Edi Beo Thu, Heuene Quene" and "Nou Skrinketh Rose" in which the Virgin Mary is addressed by her *knicht* in the language of the courtly lover discussed by Douglas Gray in *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 55-57.

20 Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., "The Darker Side to Absolon's Dawn Visit," *The Chaucer Review* 20: 3 (1986): 210.

21 Laurie A. Finke, "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision," *PQ* 67 (1988): 439-50. See also Valerie M. Lagorio's "Response to Laurie Finke's 'Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,' " *PQ* 67 (1988): 451-60.

22 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 34-35.

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