

“NASTY” WOMEN OF WESTERN LITERATURE: EMPOWERING WOMEN AGAINST
MISOGYNY BY (RE)CLAIMING LANGUAGE AND AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf, in her collection of essays *A Room of One's Own*, famously remarked, “The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting, perhaps, than the story of that emancipation itself” (72). This poignant quip rings true in that misogyny has been a present and persistent influence throughout human history, and highlights men’s unrelenting and unfathomable attempts to quiet women despite the remarkable strides women have taken in their plight to be heard. This paper will address this history and entrenchment of misogyny in our culture, but will do so by looking at key pieces of literature that explore female voices that work *against* the misogynistic rhetoric that threatens to smear the reputations of all women. This paper was borne out of a keen awareness, interest, and engagement with the particularly injurious sexist discourse vocalized by politicians of our current presidential administration, and a feeling of vulnerability in the face of these seemingly ceaseless attempts to silence “nasty” women. By surveying a number of women’s writers and women’s characters—the medieval literary marvels of Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” and Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*; the Victorian triumphs of Anne Finch’s “The Introduction,” Aphra Behn’s Preface to “The Lucky Chance” and her work “The Fair Jilt,” along with Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina*; and finally, the aforementioned and acclaimed *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf— this paper will suggest that it is in women’s reappropriation of the very stereotypes that attempt to constrain and oppress them that they can empower themselves, and find the most ingenious and powerful responses to the stifling misogyny embedded in human culture. Thus, I ultimately conclude that women throughout history have long been engaged in this reclaiming of language, typecasts and,

in turn, of agency in order to redefine and readjust the connotations and accusations surrounding women, just as the contemporary women's movement has given new meaning to the slanderous word "nasty" in order to both liberate women and generate change in our society.

i. Introduction— "Nasty" Is As "Nasty" Does

"Whether I am meant to or not, I challenge assumptions about women. I do make some people uncomfortable, which I'm well aware of, but that's just part of coming to grips with what I believe is still one of the most important pieces of unfinished business in human history—empowering women to be able to stand up for themselves." – Hillary Rodham Clinton

In the midst of our most recent United States presidential election, as democratic nominee Hillary Clinton navigated her way through the third and final debate and began a nuanced discussion of her economic plan, Donald Trump interrupted in a targeted slur against Clinton, protesting, *"Such a nasty woman."* This particular callous moment of flagrant condescension publicly marked the continual existence of a toxic ideology that underlies much of our culture: misogyny. Misogyny, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, "Hatred or dislike of, or prejudice against women," essentially promulgates the ideology that women are inferior to men in one respect or another (1a). A recent Washington Post article entitled, "How to Define, Survive, and Fight Misogyny in the Trump and Weinstein Era" by Carlos Lozada deepens this definition, adding that:

Any and all women can suffer misogyny, but its primary targets are women who overtly undermine that power imbalance, 'those who are perceived as insubordinate, negligent, or out of order' ... those unwilling to be categorized only as the supportive wife, cool girlfriend, loyal assistant or attentive waitress. Misogynists expect women to dutifully

provide 'feminine-coded goods' such as affection, adoration, and indulgence while they enjoy 'masculine-coded perks' such as leadership, authority, money and status. Women give, men take. (Lozada)

Women who violate these anticipated gender codes in particular are most often those who "call out powerful men for their misdeeds," hold a career or position of high status or influence, or reject a man sexually, romantically, etc. (Lozada). These ideas reveal a common, troubling motive among misogynists: seeking the control and containment of women, whether of their bodies, of their minds, or of their voices. In other words, when a woman gains power, she becomes a threat to the patriarchal system of order in place. Thus, according to misogynistic perceptions, she is not only dangerous, but as recently accused sexual assault perpetrator Matt Lauer allegedly put it when his lewd advances towards a coworker were denied, she is "no fun."

In understanding the extent of this noxious ideology, it is important to touch upon the severity of the problematic circumstances in which misogynistic rhetoric and belief remain alarmingly ubiquitous in our daily culture. Unfortunately, some people do not identify misogyny in the modern world as a prevalent issue, which could be attributed to the strides of progress women have made in terms of equal rights over the past century. After all, more women than ever hold and maintain successful and lucrative careers and lives; many insist that the notion of misogyny is outdated, even archaic. This misconception is not only false, but also incredibly damaging. President-elect Trump's remark against Clinton during the 2016 debate is not an uncharacteristic or rare attack, but rather has been preceded and since followed by an onslaught of misogynistic statements against women by Trump himself, who has been on record calling, "...women he does not like 'fat pigs,' 'dogs,' 'slobs,' and 'disgusting animals.'" Trump has been

reinforced in his sexism by a flurry of authoritative male voices within the government—from prevalent Senators to outspoken politicians— who, for instance, silenced “nasty-mouthed” Senator Elizabeth Warren during a congressional hearing in which she, ironically, attempted to give voice to another woman, Coretta Scott King. Most recently, there has been a disturbing outcry of sexual assault accusations against some of the most powerful and influential men in seemingly all professions – to name a few, Donald Trump, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer, Roy Moore, Bill Cosby, John Conyers, and Bill O’Reilly. Sexual assault can be understood as an extreme manifestation of pervasive societal misogyny and sexism, in that the perpetrators – typically men—seek to dominate and intimidate their victims – typically women. The justice system currently in place overall enormously fail women, often making it a woman’s responsibility to present enough evidence against her attacker to make her story trustworthy, her case only viable if the statute of limitations has not yet been reached, procedures that prefer and defer to the man’s protection. Thus, this environment where harassment and abuse are chronic — and in which women’s safety, livelihoods and well being are therefore limited — is itself misogynistic.

Regardless of one’s political views, this blatant misogyny - both spoken and written - in contemporary culture calls attention to a tradition within our society of oppressing, demeaning, and attempting to shame or intimidate women into silence. These outright displays of objectification and of prejudice against women and their thoughts, opinions, and voices express an upsetting yet normalized trend throughout history, which begs a multitude of important questions; namely how, in a period of such marked division and derision, can women respond to repugnant remarks against their sex? As Lozada contends, “We could out and rout the predators and

misogynists and attackers lurking in our midst and our memories, until all those open secrets are simply open. But even if what has been dubbed this ‘Weinstein moment’ succeeds in unmasking, shaming and banishing more and more offenders, it’s not clear that crossing names off an endless list of hideous men will topple the structures of entitlement and permissiveness enabling their actions” (Lozada). Thus, where then do we – advocates of feminism and of the female—start and progress in building and strengthening our responses?

I would like to suggest that a key place for women to gain power has been and can be in language. The revolution of resistance and support for women that has exploded from Trump’s snide quip has mainly stemmed from his use of the word “nasty” in association with “woman.” The use of the word “nasty” as an insult is seemingly meant to be a more “acceptable” stand-in for overtly offensive women specific slurs. Yet, instead of being disgraced into submission by Trump’s turn of phrase, women around the world have instead reclaimed the word nasty as their own and for their own purposes, wearing it proudly as a badge of honor. This can be observed in the progression of the Oxford English Dictionaries’ definitions for the word “nasty”: since 1390, “nasti” has been used to mean “filthy, dirty; esp. offensive through filth or dirt” or, as of around the 17th century, “morally corrupt’ indecent, obscene, lewd” (1a; 4). Yet, a recent entry for “nasty” declares it is “slang, U.S.” for “terrific, wonderful, formidable; used as a term of approval” (6). In this way, women have been able to take the stereotypes and smears hurled at them and repurpose them to their own benefit, as aforementioned in the OED, a “nasty” woman can now be interpreted as a woman who is strong and fierce, outspoken and courageous. This reclamation of language has in turn prompted an outpouring of female solidarity, with women around the world uniting under this terminology. In this way, modern women have repossessed the word nasty for themselves

when under attack of being “nasty” in the other previous senses of the word, using their own voices to speak against the often louder or more powerful male voices that attempt to silence, belittle, or discredit them.

Consequently, I argue that our responses to misogyny can be furthered through the examination of prominent literature of the past, literature about, by, or for women, women who use language in cunning ways to speak their truth. I contend that this “reclaiming” of stereotypes and derogatory statements to gain autonomy is not entirely new, but that works throughout literature have done this same kind of repurposing, and it is to literature we can and should turn to better understand misogyny, women’s continual plight against it, and how to combat it. Literature forces us to be aware and grapple with certain issues society faces by allowing us a glimpse into the minds of those being oppressed or under attack, giving readers a new perspective or broadening the depth of one’s understanding on an issue. Women characters and writers have actually been building the framework for us on this topic for centuries. Therefore, this literary tradition of female voices confronting misogyny, exploring its roots, and condemning its justifications can help shape the way women today are able to recognize misogyny. By analyzing their various methods for regaining female agency, we can learn how we can better cope with and fight against misogyny.

My research into this female literary tradition will explore seven different female responses to misogyny in Western Literature, from the medieval era to the modern, and ask central questions: What are some of the most prominent and recurring antifeminist stereotypes, where do the contradictions lie within them, and how do these stereotypes paradoxically empower these female literary voices? How does each text counteract misogyny, and how does each attempt to reclaim

and redefine female identity in the face of male assertion, coercion, and overall dominance? By directly engaging with particularly misogynistic literature and rhetoric, how does each woman contribute to a female literary tradition, and take part in—both literally and figuratively—rewriting female history?

My analysis will begin with the medieval era and a contemplation of “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” by Geoffrey Chaucer, who stands as the quintessential paradigm of the “bad woman” as she scandalously rebuts the religious doctrine and literature that suppresses her sexuality and freedoms. Next is an examination of *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan, which strives to reverse the trauma caused by misogynistic literature by reconstructing the pillars of womanhood and female identity and providing a utopian, strong female community. Following this is a move to the Victorian era and an analysis of “The Introduction” by Anne Finch, a work that engages the stereotypes of women by men, skillfully refuting the need for a man to justify her writing through her sharply critical analysis and the “expert” techniques embedded within her poetry. After this is a brief look at the preface to Aphra Behn’s “The Lucky Chance,” which offers a dialogical response in renegotiating the terms of the gender contract in literature. Accused of being overly sexual in instances in which men would not have been, Behn firmly retorts that “the pen” is her “masculine part,” thereby challenging these rigid ideologies of sex, sexuality, and woman’s censorship. Coinciding with this ideology, there is next a comparative analysis of Behn’s “The Fair Jilt” and Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina*, which confront gendered double standards in Early Modern society as well as play with stereotypes of passion, agency, sexuality, and a reversal of a woman’s passivity through the formulation of the female rake. Finally, in a transition to the modern era, *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf exemplifies a

literary tradition of female engagement with and response to misogyny in literature, explaining the differing circumstances that hindered female writers and exposing modern illusions of women's equality.

Ultimately, I'd like to argue that these literary women are in fact precisely the "nasty" women that misogynists constantly slander, as these women are imbued with passion, anger, and above all, a desire for autonomy. Yet, these women simultaneously challenge these stereotypes in order to reshape them in a more positive light and refute the negative depictions of women, especially women in, and who write or read, literature. I'd like to suggest that ultimately, misogyny has essentially always served the same purposes, and has been vocalized and manifested in the same sorts of ways: the ultimate goal being to silence and belittle women. However, I would argue that the misconception that women were essentially silent on these issues before our modern moment is false, as these texts, spanning centuries, all confront, respond, and interact directly with female stereotypes meant to harm them. They attempt to discredit misogynistic assumptions and alter misleading perceptions of women, thus negotiating and opening a legitimate, fair space for women and women's writing, a sphere in which women were able to be heard and advocating for women's autonomy and women's education. Thus, this paper will primarily focus on how these negatively marked attributes of the female were repurposed by women to instead be empowering—just as the word "nasty" has been in contemporary society.

I. Ye Nasty Women of the Middle Ages

"Come to vanquish from the world the same error into which you had fallen, so that from now on, ladies and all valiant women may have refuge and defense against the various assailants." –

Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*

a. THE WIFE OF BATH: CLAIMING “MAISTRIE” OVER THE OPPOSITE SEX

Western European culture during the Middle Ages was teeming with misogynistic ideology, as institutionalized patriarchal codes shaped, and were given credibility through, nearly every authoritative establishment, from the Church and its earliest fathers to the social hierarchies and mores of the ruling and wealthy classes. This domineering dogma inexorably percolated into the scholarship of the time, and as academic R. Howard Bloch reflects, “The discourse of misogyny runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature” (Medieval Misogyny 1).

Examples of such literature are innumerable: “in Latin satires like John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium*, Andreas Capellanus’s *Art of Courtly Love* (book 3), as well as in the *XV Joies de marriage* and what is perhaps the most virulent antimatrimonial satire in the vernacular tongue, Jehan Le Fevre’s translation of the *Lamentations de Matheolus*” (Bloch 1). This “ritual denunciation of women,” as Bloch puts it, “constitutes something on the order of a cultural constant, reaching back to the Old Testament as well as to Ancient Greece and extending through the fifteenth century” (1). Thus, with as prevalent, pervasive, and accepted as misogynistic sentiment was in both literature and in everyday custom in the Middle Ages, it is particularly valuable in understanding how medieval women experienced this culture to investigate moments where this misogyny was seemingly challenged, or at least examined, by female voices.

In alignment with this notion, Geoffrey Chaucer’s [1343-1400] self-assertive, outspoken character of the Wife of Bath offers insight into women’s engagement with and to this noxious philosophy of subjugation. For her provocative language and altogether blunt charges against the male gender, the Wife is unsurprisingly one of Chaucer’s most controversial characters, as

scholars have long contested her purpose in “The Canterbury Tales,” and struggled with whether or not she can be classified a proto-feminist of sorts. Speaking to this debate, in her essay “What Women Want: Mimesis and Gender in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath,” Anne McTaggart masterfully articulates the central questions at hand when unraveling the nuances of meaning nestled within the Wife’s Prologue and Tale, observing how, “Chaucer’s Wife of Bath centers on a wonderfully fruitful paradox: she claims for women and for herself the right to “maistrie” and “sovereynetee” in marriage, but she does so by articulating the discourse imparted to her by the “auctoritee” of anti-feminism. Indeed, this paradoxical challenge to and reiteration of anti-feminist ideas has left Chaucer’s readers debating for decades which way the irony cuts: is the Wife to be understood as a proto-feminist, or is she merely a delightful buffoon inadvertently lampooning herself for the ironic pleasure of a knowing, male audience?” (1).

Subsequently, it could be assumed that the Wife is a mere embodiment of anti-feminist rhetoric and literature, as she behaves precisely in the manner accused of and forewarned by medieval misogynists – perhaps most markedly, for her confession that “for half so boldely kan ther no man/ Swere and lyen, as a womman kan” (Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” 227-228). Furthermore, she explains that in her youth she was wayward, “faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon/ And trewely, as myne houbondes tolde me, / I hadde the beste quoniam myghte be,” casting her as the promiscuous and manipulative stereotype of the “bad” wife that prominent literature described (605-608). Indeed, there has been much scholarship in the past that has scathingly denounced her, from early commentators such as William Blake, who found her to be a “scourge and a blight,” and John Dryden, who would not dare, “to adventure on her Prologue; because tis too licentious,” to twentieth-century voices such as Tony Slade, who biting remarks,

“The Wife's character has already been exposed in some detail in her Prologue, which rambles around the theme of ‘sover-eynetee’ in marriage; her tone is coarse and garrulous, and there is little evidence of that sort of delicate poetic beauty which some critics have professed to find in the Tale itself” (Treharne 1). Ironically, these critical replies—which all use misogynistic stereotypes of women in their confrontations— all come from men centuries later in similar attempts to seemingly undermine the validity of the arguments and issues the Wife raises in her speech by condemning her character itself. The Wife could easily be responding to her own critics of the Modern Era when continually addressing all the slanderous things men have charged women with, imploring, “What eyleth swich an old man for to chide?” illuminating, too, the longevity of misogyny in our society (278; 281). It is precisely and predominantly this engagement with and to these kinds of persistent antifeminist forces that the Wife seems to be directing her words to as she discusses and takes issue with the writings of antifeminists cited in her Prologue, which is why I would like to assert that in her individuality and fearlessness, the Wife seems to serve as a brilliant depiction of how an early “proto”-feminist could have been, as she embodies these stereotypes to actively call attention to and subvert them in ways we still do in contemporary culture.

Though Chaucer cannot exactly speak from a woman's own experiences, he nonetheless masterfully gives the Wife of Bath a consciousness and a vital humanity through his superb writing capability, depicting how real lives were affected by this ideology. The wife speaks candidly about her experiences with misogynistic stereotypes, such as her repeated testimonies of the things, “Thou [men] seyest” of women, such as, “And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,/ Thou seyest that every holour wol hire have;/ She may no while n chastitee abyde” (253-255). Yet,

she also expresses the trauma these broodings cause her, as she proclaims, “Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,/ The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?” (786-787). These experiences of discomfort and actual physical pain at the internalization of this misogyny is indicative of how most women feel when subjected to it, and not only sheds light on how medieval women could and would have felt about hearing these things, which is in a way incredibly similar to how women still feel today, but this harm to women’s psyche is at the very core of misogynists purpose: that is, to gain control and domination. As Jill Mann contends:

The double structure of the Wife's speech thus has a meaning of far wider import than its role in the Wife's individual experience. And yet it plays a crucial role in creating our sense of the Wife as a living individual. For what it demonstrates is her interaction with the stereotypes of her sex, and it is in this interaction that we feel the three-dimensionality of her existence. That is, she does not live in the insulated laboratory world of literature, where she is no more than a literary object, unconscious of the interpretations foisted upon her; she is conceived as a woman who lives in the real world, in full awareness of the anti-feminist literature that purports to describe and criticize her behavior, and she has an attitude to it just as it has an attitude to her. (Treharne 3)

In this way, the Wife’s Prologue highlights the impact of these misogynistic broodings on the lives and reputations of real women, ultimately exhibiting that, “Texts affect lived lives, and the Wife’s feminist criticism demonstrates this: if women had relatively little opportunity to author texts, they nonetheless felt their effects” (Dinshaw 14). Yet, the Wife does not allow Jankyn this power over her; in a moment of truly remarkable and radical indignation, “whan [the Wife] saugh he wolde nevere fine/ to redden on this cursed book al nyght,/ Al sodeynly thre leves have I plight/ out of

his book, right as he radde, and eke/ I with my fest so took hym on the cheke/ that in oure fyr he fil backward adoun” (788-793). Not only does the Wife throw the pages into the fire, but the misogynist himself falls down with them, symbolic of her stand to destroy these treatises and the ones who propagate them (and, to replace them with her Tale). The Wife of Bath thus seems to represent the culmination of all these “bad wives” and the manifestation of their traits. Yet, by giving her (and in effect, them) a voice, “Chaucer, as a man writing in the voice of a woman opposing this tradition, explores the impact of writing in creating gender itself” – precisely the same way that these ‘old dolts’ the Wife refers to seem to attempt to falsely create and thus slight the female gender by writing all women as bad (Dinshaw 15). In this vein, it seems to be the Wife’s very embodiment of these “bad” traits that gives her a sense of agency and autonomy as an individually minded, opinionated woman of her time, proudly admitting to these characteristics instead of being shamed into silence, and boasting them with an air of satisfaction and utter candor. In this way, the Wife seems to be reclaiming these roles that were meant to harm her, and instead wearing them as badges of honor, much like contemporary women have done with the word “nasty” with all its contexts and connotations. In turn, Chaucer seems to be writing a new narrative for women – one in which women have the control and mastery.

In this same manner, it seems especially poignant and defining insofar as exploring the Wife of Bath’s character that, while nearly every other character in Chaucer’s tale is described using their occupation (for instance, The Knight, The Prioress, or The Miller, to name a few), Alisoun is distinguished and demarcated for being a wife, despite the fact that it is revealed to us almost immediately that she is a merchant. Thus, Chaucer seems to suggest that wifehood is not only her primary function in the narrative, but also perhaps her primary “trade,” i.e. her

importance stems from this womanhood, and as we are meant to recognize her principally as a *bad* wife, and her main role becomes defending her own sex. Therefore, when confronted with the “book of Wikked Wyves” the Wife of Bath not only opposes it, but vehemently protects women’s reputations by underlining that none of these texts were written by women themselves, then scandalously and continuously formulating logical arguments using biblical allusions and holy men to justify her reasoning (685). This can be observed when she deliberately underscores why men of the period, particularly old clerks and scholars, composed copious amounts of misogynistic and anti-women literature: because, as all interpretation bears the mark of the interpreter, these old men—who she has authority to speak of because she has experience in marriage to them—are frustrated with their own sexual inadequacy and ability to perform, and thus whine instead about the infidelity of women. As the Wife puts it, “The clerk, whan he is oold, and may nought do/ Any of Venus’s werkes worth his old shoe” will “writ his dotage/ that women kan nat kepe hir mariage!” (707-710). Moreover, she explains that “For trusteth wel, it is an impossible/ that any clerk will speak good of wyves” for this reason, and claims that if women “hadde written stories/ as clerkes han withinne hire oratories,” there would be a tremendous amount of literature speaking also of the wickedness of men (688-689; 694). Yet, since most women were constrained by societal limitations and domestic expectations, the literature is left to the men to write, in which “no woman of no clerk is preysed” (706). Who called the lion a savage beast, she implores of the group in a simple metaphor, concluding it certainly was not the lion itself (692).

By taking these negative assumptions about women and finding a logical root for them, other than the notion that women are merely inherently wicked, rather than merely embodying the stereotype of the wicked wife, the Wife of Bath fervently pushes back against these stereotypes

that seek to control her and control the perception of all women, reclaiming them in order to empower herself. Moreover, the Wife continuously brings up biblical men to help validate her ways of living: when defending her multiple marriages, she argues, “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye/... he seyde myn housbande/ Sholde lete fader and mooder and take me./ But of no nombre mencion made he, Of bigayme, or of octogame;/ Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye?” (28-34). Similarly, she alludes to “the wise kyng, daun Salomon” whom “I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.” (35-36) In this way, the Wife seems to be internalizing these stories of the Bible, then reinterpreting and repurposing them in order to empower, rather than cast shame upon, women who live their lives freely as she does. Simply put, through this method of reclaiming language, the Wife is able to gain agency. As Carolyn Dinshaw eloquently contends in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*:

She is in fact the anti-feminist stereotype of a nightmare wife come to life: she says to her husbands, for example, exactly what Theophrastus said bad wives say to their husbands. But even as she thus confirms the stereotype, the Wife in her mimesis takes a stand-in subversion of it: she repeats the anti-feminist discourse with a difference, finally seizing that book and ripping it up. Chaucer’s creation of her is an act of feminist literary criticism.

(14)

The Wife essentially seems to be “quite”-ing these antagonistic male-driven sentiments, not in the least concerned with what Christian male authorities have to say on the Bible and about her conduct nor what her husbands have to say about how a wife should behave, but rather, only about what she desires and what brings her mirth and amusement.

It is curious to note, too, that the Wife of Bath is interrupted not once in her Prologue, but on numerous occasions, the most significant being the Friar who complains of the length of her Prologue –which she then “quite-s” through hilariously satirizing monks at the beginning of her Tale. While these moments of interruption nearly directly reflect, centuries later, Trump’s interruption of Hillary Clinton, scrutinizing her for speaking up and speaking proudly, they also speak to the Wife’s own sense of agency and her proto-feminist, progressive views even within a period riddled with woman-hating, woman-beating, and the silencing of women overall. Thus, by giving her this power to strike back, and shifting the perspective to that of this “nasty” woman herself, Chaucer invites his audience to glean insight into an all-too-overlooked perspective, Chaucer enables the Wife—on behalf of all women—to have a voice with which to defend herself while appropriating these negative depictions of women into something empowering – her tale ultimately signifying that what women want most of all is this autonomy she openly exercises.

Echoing the final lines of her Prologue in which Jankyn tells her she can claim “al the soveraynetee” in their marriage, her Tale tells of a Knight who rapes a woman and, in order to save his life, must discover what women most desire (818). In the Tale he reveals, “women desiren to have sovereyntee” and “for to been in maistrie [hir housbond] above,” and eventually ends up “in parfit joye” in his marriage, but only when things become resolved through giving his wife total power (1257-1259). In this regard, while the Wife of Bath may be considered a sort of exemplar of all the stereotypes of women as greedy, self-serving parasites combined, these specific lines tie into the idea of the Wife of Bath as, again, a “proto-feminist,” who speaks of the different varying discourses she has learned and has been exposed to and creates a powerful counterargument to men who represent women as rotten and evil, and who blame and scapegoat

women rather than owning up to their own faults and shortcomings. The moral takeaway of the tale demonstrates the power of listening to women (an act which provides the turning point in her Tale and is the reason the knight is not put to death for his crime—which coincidentally, is a crime of overpowering and forcing a woman against her will), and the benefits of giving them mastery in marriage, as the Knight ends up perfectly happy as well. The word “maisterie” is defined by the OED as “superiority or ascendancy in battle or competition, or in a struggle of any kind; victory resulting in domination or subjugation”; thus, the Wife principally craves to claim a sort of victory for women in this certain arena of life, a victory of power that men have long enjoyed (1a).

Therefore, she is not the docile, obedient woman that the Clerk describes when he “quites” her tale (which is ironic since he tells the tale of the ideal woman, who happens to be everything the Wife of Bath is not), but a boisterous, outspoken woman who engages with the social expectations of the time and responds to them in a sort of call to arms to other wise wives. Though she struggles between her own personhood and the way others try to define her, she *speaks* rather than being spoken about with defined energy and fervor—thus, a victory to the cause of women’s rights in her very existence.

Finally, these ideas also reflect *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, which, through the verbal portraits created and the constant back and forth “quite”ing of the characters, can be understood as a heteroglossia of different voices each addressing the social expectations and anxieties people had about certain types of people, as Chaucer crafts multi-faceted characters who do not always end up aligning with how they are initially portrayed, or how they would be interpreted initially in real life. The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale could represent Chaucer as being the “friend of women,” or could be yet another unconventional depiction of a member of

society—a “bad wife”— that sows doubt in the reader’s mind about how we are supposed to view and judge women in society. Overall, it seems that the Wife of Bath is meant to be a voice of the female that propagandizes a new truth in the midst of misogynistic literature of the Middle Ages. Therefore, in her embodiment of a “nasty” wife who simultaneously confronts and rebuts the negative attributes prescribed to her through engaging these stereotypes head-on, not only does the Wife of Bath provide a new perspective on wifhood, but on the role and power of women in general.

b. CHRISTINE DE PIZAN AND THE BOOK OF THE CITY OF LADIES: BUILDING UPON TRADITIONS OF WOMEN’S WIT AND RESILIENCE

In her novel *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan [1364-1430] takes a deeply personal and fierce, yet simultaneously articulate and dignified approach to the misogynistic literature of the Middle Ages, first speaking to the damaging effects of her own internalization of misogynistic rhetoric, then later countering the insidious, inflammatory antifeminist literary tradition by building a City of Ladies. In turn, she offers a “new” type of perspective on women in literature: the perspective of a woman, from a woman author. Through the poignant use of allegorical figures—in this case, the embodiments of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice as women— Pizan illustrates her own lived experiences with this kind of rhetoric, and how through her encounters with these “women,” is prompted to “come back to herself” and “not trouble [herself] anymore over such absurdities,” being restored in her own observed truth that, “Causing any damage to harm one party in order to help another party is not justice – and likewise, attacking all feminine conduct is contrary to the truth” (Pizan 8; 10).

In this feminization of virtue, Pizan's ultimate goal seems to be that of, as Marina Warner puts it, "moral tutor," to rehabilitate her sex and to replace the portrait of the "bad woman" by calling back to memory the "lives and deeds of virtuous women of the past," who have been overlooked by history (Foreword xii). As Warner astutely reflects in her foreword to Pizan's literary triumph, Pizan "restores speech to the silent portion of the past," giving a voice to these women who have been scorned or ignored by scholars and thus altogether "silenced" (xiii). Thus, Pizan can be added alongside Chaucer's the Wife of Bath as a so-called "nasty woman," for her challenging of the misogynistic norms of the period, as a woman who takes the negative stereotypes of women and reclaims them as empowering, debunking the assertions that women are inherently wicked. In a voice of controlled indignation, Pizan offers thoughtful arguments to counter society's attitudes and opinions towards women, arguments that hold just as much relevance and resonance today as they still ring true in the modern world.

To begin, it is significant to point out Pizan's title, which is *The Book of the City of Ladies*, not of *women*. While this may seem like a word choice meant to exclude rather than include, to speak only about the educated and elite ladies of the time, rather, I'd like to offer that Pizan has instead taken over the traditional term "lady" and invested in it an innovative significance: that is, a "lady" for Christine refers to the nobility of the soul rather than the nobility of the blood (Richards xx). In this way, Pizan "transposes the dignity afforded to noble women in the late medieval class structure to women who have proven their worthiness through their achievements, whether military, political, or religious" (xxx). Therefore, just as the word "nasty" has been infused with a new significance of empowerment in contemporary society, Christine reclaims the word "lady" to express that "every woman possessed the potential for true nobility" (xxx). Pizan

cunningly names her new kingdom “Kingdom of Femininity,” the City of Ladies rather than the City of Women, in order to make readers clearly understand her underlying point: that is, that all women could find a place in a city of ladies by realizing their “feminine potential” (xxx). Thus, the word “lady” becomes a symbol representative of inclusion and empowerment, a plea for the recognition of women’s contributions in social and political life.

Moreover, Pizan’s adept manipulation of language can be attributed to her education as well as her desire to “disprove masculine myths and appeal for change,” as her “learnedness served as a springboard for her to address the question of women’s role in society in more extensive terms” (xxx). Pizan immediately asserts her superior education from the first few lines of the novel, suggesting that education will be the foundation of much of her argument. This hypothesis proves to be accurate, as Pizan repeatedly uses her education as the basis by which to criticize authority: by page three she is already disregarding Maltheoulus’ work with the biting criticism that not only is it a conglomeration of lies, but that it has a “lack of integrity in diction and theme,” and she resolves to “turn [her attention to more elevated and useful study” (3). Yet, it is after this encounter with Maltheoulus’s work that an apparent shift is felt in Pizan’s tone, as the derision she has read puzzles and troubles her deeply. Using logic and reason, she desperately tries to work through one of the most critical questions of this misogynistic rhetoric: “How it happened that so many different men, and learned men among them, have been so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior?” (3) “I do not know how to understand this repugnance” she sighs, “It all seems they speak from one and the same mouth” (4). Since, as she notes, “they all concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice,” and “it would be impossible for

so many famous men – such solemn scholars... to have spoken so falsely on so many occasions,” she finally resolves that she has no choice but to rely “more on the judgments of others than on what I myself felt and knew,” and finally decides “God formed a vile creature when He made woman... I detested myself and the entire feminine sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature” (4). This section of Pizan’s text reflects her keen ability to use deduction and reason, illustrating her immense intelligence.

Yet, the real point Pizan seems to be making is the psychological toll that internalizing this rhetoric has on real lives – real women – that are deeply affected by this constant outflow of derogatory slander against women by men, so much so that even women start to believe it. Similarly, though the Wife of Bath was not educated or literate, she internalized oral readings of this literature and thus understood the implications this literature had against women; here, Pizan is able to read the very words themselves, and both examples demonstrate how medieval women, regardless of class and status, would have felt about this literature. Their responses, though marked by their differences in education, are again, essentially similar: whereas the Wife of Bath was so outraged by this type of literature that she impulsively incinerated it, and attempts to use her voice to help build a female tradition of good women through her fairy-tale like story, Pizan similarly works to extinguish these accusations about women and make something new, too – a metaphorical City of Ladies, with her book itself standing as a temple of solace in literature for which women can find shelter. As the first of the three Ladies reminds Christine, “you know that any evil spoken of women so generally only hurts those who say it, not women themselves,” reminding Pizan not to acknowledge these evils as truth or actual reflections on the character of

womankind, and to instead help build a new feminocentric and realistic literary tradition of women, by women (8).

Similar to the Wife of Bath once more, Pizan directly engages with the misogynistic rhetoric and literature of the time, which is done in order to further her emphasis on the importance of the erudition of women, as well as their participation in literary and cultural life. Pizan fervently objected to the treatment of women in “The Romance of the Rose,” for instance, and was supported in her counterattacks by the influential chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, seemingly giving her voice, thoughts, and opinions validation and credibility in the public, educated sphere. “If women had written the books we read, they would have handled things differently, for women know they have been falsely accused,” she writes in response, an argument quite similar in fact to the Wife of Bath’s (11). Furthermore, she cleverly sets forth that: Those who attack women because of their own vices are men who spent their youths in dissolution and enjoyed the love of many different women, used deception in many of their encounters, and have grown old in their sins without repenting, and now regret their past follies and the dissolute life they led. But Nature, which allows the will of the heart to put into effect what the powerful appetite desires, has grown cold in them. Therefore, they are pained when they see that their good time has now passed them by, and it seems to them that the young, who are now what they once were, are at the top of the world. They do not know how to overcome their sadness except by attacking women, hoping to make women less attractive to other men. Everywhere one sees such old men speak obscenely and dishonestly, just as you can fully see Maltheoulus, who himself confesses that he was an impotent old man filled with desire. You

can thereby convincingly prove, with this one example, how what I tell you is true, and you can assuredly believe that it is the same with many others. (19)

This carefully rendered retort that gives reason to the misogyny of the period, instead of blaming women's lack of moral integrity for their representations in literature, allows Christine to begin to rebuild her own confidence and self-assuredness, as well as rebuild the reputation of women in the Middle Ages.

It is important to note, too, that for men, there is this recurrent theme of their sexuality being at stake in most of these motives for them to vilify women, as when they perceive inferiority in their own bodies, they project this vulnerability onto the women they cannot satisfy, accusing women of being inherently weak in mind, character, and constancy rather than facing their own shortcomings. As Christine contends that these sorts of men are, "evil, diabolical people who wish to twist the good as well as the virtue of kindness naturally found in women into evil and reproach" (26). From this line, she then goes on to detail in great length the stories of other "good women" from all sorts of religions, myths, and cultures—from Mary Magdalene, to Queen of Sheba, to Marie of Blois, Hippolyta, Zenobia, Minerva, etc.—who's stories act as the actual building blocks that support and shelter her city of ladies, as they correspondingly support her overall thesis. Not coincidentally, all the women she calls to memory are strong women with formidable ideas and thoughts who have helped the growth and well-being of civilizations and often of humanity as a whole, thus reversing the assumptions that these traits, when found in women, must necessarily be threatening, or "bad." A keen example she draws forth refers to the Bible, in that, "If anyone would say that man was banished because of Lady Eve, I tell you that he gained more through Mary than he ever lost through Eve," thus tying in the Church to her logic to

support her assertions on both intellectual and religious grounds, and consequently adding another layer of credibility to her arguments (13).

From these justifications, Lady Rectitude finally critically implores, “How many harsh beatings, without cause or reason, how many injuries, how many cruelties, insults, humiliations, and outrages have so many upright women suffered, none of whom cried out for help?” (119). The *Book of the City of Ladies*, thus, seems to be Pizan’s own “battle cry,” of sorts, her valiant defense of women and their inherent nobility and “goodness.” By adding her voice and views into the literature of the time, she stirs a conversation about women’s role in the Middle Ages, and counters much of the inflammatory accusations wrongfully flung against women, women who could not defend themselves because they did not typically have the education to do so. “Where is there a city so strong which could not be taken immediately if no resistance were forthcoming...” she asks, metaphorically symbolizing that such defamation exists against women only because their morality could not be properly fortified, as most women of the period were uneducated and illiterate and therefore could do little to deflect or denounce any such assaults (Pizan 13). Yet, in her building of the city, and in her feminization of virtue through the personifications of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, Christine offers a strikingly successful attempt to not only remind, but rewrite the true history of women, as she represents a womanly eloquence, the affinity women have for learning, the power of the educated woman, and the double standards of men, who she suggests should examine their own morality before attacking others. In this way, Pizan’s novel “represents a determined and clear-headed attempt to take apart the structure of her contemporaries prejudices” through the interspersions of “formidable and exemplary heroines of the past with down to earth remarks about the wrongs done to women by society’s attitudes and

opinions,” and thus is a triumphant endeavor to reclaim agency and authority for women in the Middle Ages (xiii).

II. Nasty Women Of The Victorian Era; Or, Virtue Befouled

“Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, to absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.” – Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*

a. ANNE FINCH’S “THE INTRODUCTION”: CLAIMING RIGHTS TO WRITE

In the early modern era, women writers continued to struggle with the complex query of how to claim authority in a culture that obstinately and steadfastly denied it to women. Prolific poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea [1661-1720], attempted to challenge societal limitations set upon women and advocated the capability and right for educated women to share their voice in the public sphere through writing. However, Finch was an elite woman expected to only fulfill certain patriarchal standards of being and was therefore unsurprisingly met with many obstacles in attempting to enact these beliefs and broaden the scope of accepted female behavior. Thus, as a way around these limitations, Finch tended to legitimize her work through another male agent—which in turn could be perceived in contemporary culture as undermining her own work or

supporting or legitimizing misogynistic rhetoric about the inferiority or inability of the female to speak for herself. Moreover, Finch, like Pizan, uses examples of other women to carve out a space both for herself as well as for the woman writer, though despite this, continued to authorize her own work through the authority of prevailing male figures, which again seemingly exposes an underlying, crucial tension between effectively legitimizing women's authorship yet paradoxically marginally acquiescing to the exact patriarchal codes set up by society that impeded and discouraged women's writing. Yet, in deeper examination of her poetry, it becomes clear that Finch often toyed with this authority in a playful way that nearly parodied this need for male approval and acceptance, while using this male authority to her own advantage. Likewise, I would like to suggest that in her vital work, "The Introduction," Finch uses this type of male authorization as a strategic attempt to gain tolerance and agency for women. By using the highest male authority (God) to contest this cluster of patriarchal gender codes, and in a sense finding an ingenious "loophole" to the constraints set upon women, Finch contends that an educated woman fulfilling her intellectual potential is a critical component of society and rebuts the negative stereotypes prescribed to her and her sex as innately less intelligent than men, ultimately adding herself to this collection of "nasty" women.

In her poem "The Introduction," Finch insightfully confronts the gender politics of her era by first challenging the stereotypes set upon women, then resourcefully interweaving biblical references of theological men and women in order to legitimize her own authority as a woman and women's writer—much like Pizan does centuries prior. Finch begins by mordantly noting, "A woman that attempts the pen/ Such an intruder on the rights of men," instantly calling into question this "right" of men to write that women are consequently seen as imposing upon because

men believed that women should be occupying their time with more “suitable” matters (Finch 9-10). Likewise, she perceptively continues “They tell us we mistake our sex and way;/ Good breeding, fashion, dance, dressing, play/ Are the accomplishments we should desire,” pointing out the vapid lifestyle that men expected elite women to assume, as “To write or read or think or to inquire/ Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time, / And interrupt the conquests of our prime” (13-15; 16-18). Finch sardonically scrutinizes and denounces this notion that elite women’s time should be filled with activities merely to enhance one’s beauty and satisfy the duties of “a servile house,” maintaining that this is not, contrary to the patriarchal principles ingrained within her society, the “utmost art, and use” of women (19-20).

After setting up this series of dismaying circumstances and standards prescribed to women, Finch turns to the authority of the Bible to make her case in favor of elite women’s capabilities and right to write, bringing in the figure of Deborah as the ultimate paradigm of the importance and sway of strong female figures historically:

A woman here leads faintly Israel on,
 She fights, she wins, she triumphs with a song,
 Devout, majestic, for the subject fit,
 And far above her arms, exalts her wit. (45-48)

While this reliance on the prominent male figure of God to stake her claim could be viewed as undermining her credibility and agency, rather, I believe it serves as a tactful way to argue for the rights of women writers using the highest male authority of all, since no earthly man would contest the word or will of God. Furthermore, by referencing Deborah, Finch makes the critical point that had Deborah been told to merely focus on her vanity and live a submissive existence,

her country would have been left in chaos and shambles, illustrating the importance and necessity of enlightened females intellectuals within society. The notion of Deborah as a key leader, judge, and even advisor of military strategy asserts that the disparity of social influence between men and women is not immutable, and reinforces Finch's claims that an elite woman should not be confined in her intellect or restrained by societal ideologies of women's femininity, but should rather be educated in order to become an illustrious member of society. Likewise, by aligning the early modern woman's writer with figures and stories from the Old Testament, Finch not only claims the own significance of her voice and creates this space of authority for the elite female writer endorsed by God himself, but further posits that women are not historically or innately inferior to men, but rather, have lacked the education to become intellectually equal with them, "fallen by mistaken rules and education" and thus "debarred from all improvements of the mind" (53). The deliberate use of iambic hexameter in Finch's last line asserts her overall mastery over the poetic form and thus situates herself within this tradition of knowledgeable, powerful women, valued for their wit and ability over their passivity. Thus, Finch's use of the ultimate male authority, as well as another powerful woman, emphasizes and deepens her credibility and the credibility of other women's writers.

Ultimately, through her poetry, Finch skillfully faces the problematic question of how a woman can reclaim authority by (rather ironically, and ingeniously) using powerful men, Christian ideology, and other women to legitimize the status of the female. The notion of gender politics is inextricable from this question of authority, and thus in legitimizing herself, Finch also cunningly comments upon the power relations between elite men and women of the era, using the highest male authority (God) to authorize her work. By reclaiming the often patriarchal teachings of the

Church as advantageous to women's rights to write, Finch carves out a space for the female writer that mortal men could not rightfully contest, thus "taking a stab" at misogyny with the poetics of the pen. Finch, therefore, played a pivotal role in shaping various ways in which women's work could be legitimized, supporting a female community of women's writers, and in stipulating how women's compositions should be judged and received within society.

b. APHRA BEHN AND ELIZA HAYWOOD: RENEGOTIATING GENDER CODES THROUGH THE MIGHTY PEN

Both Aphra Behn [1640-1689] and Eliza Haywood [1693-1756] were prominent authors who wrote during the Victorian era, a time in which many believed women's voices to be all but silenced in the public sphere. Yet, both women wrote copiously, often calling into question the biases placed against women and the privileges men, and male writers, seemed to enjoy freely. These women were pivotal in the gradual acceptance and success of female artists; it was Virginia Woolf who once claimed, "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds" (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 116). Likewise, Behn can be considered one of the first (if not the first) professional female writers, meaning she made a profit from her writings, and thus when met with the obstacles imposed by men for women to make strides in the public arena of writing and entertainment, she often skillfully objected and replied. For instance, in the Preface to her play "The Lucky Chance," Behn demands of her critics, "All I ask, is the Priviledge for my Masculine Part, the Poet in me, (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in, to take those Measures that both the Ancient and Modern Writers have set me, and by

which they have pleas'd the World so well" (Behn xi). By contesting the overly sexual nature of her plays –plays that, were they written by a man, would not have been so derided— and by asserting that the pen is in fact her phallic part, Behn lures men into this conversation about the terms of the gender “contract,” refusing these pure categories of the male and female arenas and instead offering a dialogical response. Therefore, Behn uses this defamation against her work as an empowering agent, and rather than be silenced, uses this idea of being “overly sexual” and other smears to her advantage, adding her (and Haywood, later discussed) to this tradition of “nasty” women.

Consequently, women writers of the Early Modern period such as Behn and Haywood were met with the profound challenge of representing a “female desiring subject” in literature within a society in which male prerogatives and perceptions of how women should behave dominated culture. As aforementioned, “good” women of this period were expected to be well mannered, submissive and altogether naïve about sex and sexuality; thus, this was the depiction of women encapsulated in much of the prominent literature of the era. As a result, both Behn and Haywood radically explored and experimented with the question of *what would happen if the woman attempted to claim the role of the partner in power in a sexual exchange, rather than guileless victim?* Both Behn, in her work “The Fair Jilt” and Haywood, in *Fantomina, or, Love in a Maze*, pointedly and playfully rewrite, revise, and in fundamental ways, reverse the common tropes, scripts, and scenarios of the emblematic male “libertine” within amorous fiction in order to allow the typically marginalized zone and perspective of the woman to prevail. Moreover, both writers were fundamental in opening this space in Early Modern literature for the desiring woman to be represented, as they allow each of their female protagonists to devise and control the “means

of seduction” and, in turn, gave women readers a sense of autonomy otherwise rigorously denied to them in this arena. Thus, authors such as Behn and Haywood helped mold and contribute to a “feminocentric” literary collection that offers different views of the ways women of the Early Modern period attempted to manage and work through the “double bind” that Eros posed to them—in this case, by depicting the “female rake.”

I’d like to propose that this “female rake” is demarcated by her *active* role and use of deviant, devious tactics to craft and execute seductive schemes in efforts to sate her own pleasures and desires. While notions of sexual freedom for women remained somewhat illusory, this ironic inversion of gendered power in literature nonetheless exposed gendered hypocrisies within society and served to highlight and publicize notions of feminine artfulness, skill, and agency, as seen in both “The Fair Jilt” and “Fantomina,” within key instances of deliberate deceit and calculated manipulation by their female protagonists, dually allowing women writer’s to rewrite female characters as strong agents and claim their own sense of sexual indulgence just as men were able to.

Behn’s protagonist in, “The Fair Jilt,” the cunning sybarite Miranda, masterminds a series of plots to seduce a sequence of young men in order to satisfy her own sensual motives, thus perfectly embodying this notion of the female rake. Moreover, by upholding the typical “sex-as-force” literary scenario of the era but reversing the traditional gendered roles—the female becoming the predatory agent while the man is rendered the powerless object— Behn consequently provides a refreshing depiction of the lady-in-love as an active, autonomous being. This is superbly demonstrated in the scene in which Miranda proclaims her love for young priest Henrick in the church, as when he is openly resistant to Miranda’s initial ploys to win his

affections, she expresses her outrage in the characteristic “codified language of the male seducer,” exclaiming, “Answer my flame, my raging fire, which your eyes have kindled; or here, in this very moment, I will ruin thee” and “take away your life and honour,” a proclamation which leaves the hapless priest “trembling” (Bowers, “Sex, Lies, and Invisibility” 56; Behn, “The Fair Jilt, 46). For a woman in society to behave this way would have been perceived as subversive and appalling, and yet not so for the man—therefore, by not completely overhauling the expected power dynamics in scenarios of courtship, but merely reversing them, Behn offers a powerful testament to the gendered double standards cemented into amatory culture. Furthermore, by positioning female characters like Miranda as “both the central subject of the narrative and the possessor of active sexual subjectivity,” rather than as mere recipients of desire, authors such as Behn ultimately, “threaten[ed] traditional male prerogatives based on female subjugation and objectification, and provide [d] space for readers to imagine something new” (Bowers 58).

This striking demonstration of female adroitness is further asserted as the church scene progresses, as in response to the priest denying her advances, Miranda convincingly stages her own pseudo-rape, a fabrication so persuasive in fact that Henrick is arrested and put in prison for many years. Miranda is not only able to regain power over the situation through this deceptive performance, but exhibits the artful abilities of the female subject to, like the archetypal male profligate, mold a situation to fit her agenda and subsequently “triumph” over the male object of her desire, epitomizing the characterization of the female rake (Behn 50). It is indisputably Miranda that maintains the control within this sexual encounter, for though she does not have the physical ability to actually rape the priest, her ensuing scheme, in which she casts herself as the target of the very atrocity she herself attempted to commit, impressively and inventively condemns

the priest but also “beats patriarchy at its own game” (Bowers 57). Therefore, while a unique, specifically female model of sexuality is never quite realized, the importance of moments such as these lies in the effort of Behn to at least open this space in literature for female desire to be explored and acknowledged, and to provide readers with a femino-centric version and vision of otherwise male-dominated situations, as in scenarios of lust. The lasting value and appeal of Behn’s work lies in her keen capability to overturn conventional, gendered stereotypes of *who* was permitted to act upon desire in society, as the misogynistic portrayal of the passive, defenseless woman of standard amatory fiction is—if rather comically—confronted and replaced by Behn with the image of the quick-witted, conniving female rake.

Similarly to Behn’s Miranda, in Haywood’s *Fantomina, or, Love in a Maze*, the protagonist epitomizes this notion of the female rake by exploring and quenching her own sensuous urges, passionate yearnings, and steadfast objectives by artfully and continually duping and outmaneuvering the clueless Beauplaisir. Fantomina is essentially the female equivalent of the male libertine, gaining agency and garnering a fulfilling sense of power through the active use of subterfuge and duplicity to con and seduce the object of her affection; yet, instead of using this power to conquer a series of different men, Fantomina uses her power to attempt to confound only *one*. Specifically, Fantomina plays out her role as female rake by assuming an assortment of fraudulent identities, such as the Widow Bloomer and Incognita, masquerading as entirely new women each time in order to experience “the first time” with Beauplaisir again and again without his knowledge, using his libertine faithlessness to her advantage and ingeniously allowing him to garner a false sense of control. This is the type of calculated plan that typically the man would devise, and Fantomina discovers that she too finds, unsurprisingly, immense satisfaction from

accomplishing her ruses. “How could she not forbear laughing heartily” she reflects in one instance, “to think of the Tricks she had played him and applauding her own Strength of Genius and Force of resolution, which by such un-thought of Ways could triumph over her Lover’s Inconstancy, and render that very Temper, which to other Women is the greatest Curse, a means to make herself more Blessed” (Haywood 243). It is this active engagement in shaping her own future, this questioning of social norms of pleasure and conquest, and this ardent pursual of her own desires that prominently defines the female rake—which, undoubtedly, Fantomina embodies. Moreover, this harkens back to Pizan’s remarks about the hypocritical nature of men, and how they should examine their own morals before libeling the morals of women.

One of the most superb mechanisms of deception of Haywood’s female rake (along with Behn’s as well, though Miranda’s skillful letters are not provided) is her ability to all too easily craft deceitful letters of courtship to her male object, which seems to, in a way, further highlight women’s literary skills, thus accentuating women’s abilities and indirectly authorizing women’s writing. This letter-writing serves as a means of seduction, but also offers a certain agency to Fantomina through the concealment of her true self, while the back and forth literary exchange between man and woman depicts a woman’s equal ability for adept artifice, to write not just an outpouring of passionate ramblings, but as part of a premeditated strategy to achieve her aims. Moreover, like her letters, Fantomina’s continual façade made up of distinctive wardrobes, disguises, and personas convey and celebrate a specifically feminine artistry and cunning. For instance, when dressed as Incognita, Fantomina cleverly hides her face so as to conceal her true identity, and when Beauplaisir confidently attempts to catch the sight of her by the morning light, she is already one step ahead, having “taken care to blind the Windows in such a manner, that not

the least Chink was left to let in day” (Haywood 245). Through moments such as these, Haywood illustrates Fantomina as having the supreme control and foreknowledge in each sexual interaction with Beauplaisir, reversing this trope of male domination and thus, in a way, undermining the domineering masculine control of traditional Early Modern courtship. Through her endeavors to stay on equal footing with Beauplaisir by this constant recreation of self, each new persona subsequently allows Fantomina a new freedom, an agency otherwise denied of women, and allows Haywood to boldly explore this realm of the desirous female, while also exploiting the gendered hypocrisies regarding male/ female conduct inbuilt and ingrained within Fantomina’s society. “O that all neglected wives, and fond abandoned nymphs would take this method!” she proclaims, “Men would be caught in their own snare, and have no cause to scorn our easy, weeping, wailing sex!” (251). In an era where women’s virtue was revered and advocated to the most stringent degree, Haywood offers her female character and female reader instead—however short-lived—a sense of female agency, expression, and insight into a male dominated realm, and through Fantomina’s astute trickery, overturns the perception of women as incapable of being anything but the innocent, submissive sexual conquest.

Despite the agency and cunning both Haywood and Behn seem to be attributing to their female protagonists, the query lingers as to why, then, both female characters are eventually caught in their own web of transgressions – in other words, *why must the female rake fall?* While it is true that each writer’s female protagonists do suffer consequences as a result of their “licentious” behavior, I’d like to suggest that this is not an ultimate condemnation or denunciation of desiring women, but rather another key avenue in underscoring hypocritical gendered codes of conduct, as well as a necessary literary stratagem to enable their work to be published and

circulated in the print marketplace. Both Haywood and Behn's characters have fleeting experiences with being able to act upon their sexual desires, as within their society, the "wanton" sexual desire of the woman was seen as necessarily needing containment and eventual restriction in order to uphold the moral principles of Early Modern culture. Yet, Behn and Haywood handle this obligatory entrenchment of their characters back into the reality of female expectations in subtly ingenious ways: for instance, Miranda is guilty of countless morally reprehensible acts, but is not imprisoned or put to death like the males involved, and gets to live the rest of her life in relative comfort and leisure in Holland. As libertine men were rarely denounced or punished for their wrongdoings, free to act however they pleased, the conclusion to "The Fair Jilt" delivers its protagonist a realistic, didactic end, but doesn't make her suffer anything too severe or extreme, allowing Miranda to perhaps retain a sense of the liberation enjoyed by innumerable male libertines. Haywood's ending is not quite as forgiving: Fantomina ultimately gets pregnant, goes into labor publicly, and is sent to spend the rest of her days in a convent.

This ending could be read as a moralizing conclusion of Fantomina's lewdness, but could alternatively be interpreted as a biting, stark depiction of the circumstances and reality of the female rake, whose biological make-up and societal expectations of innocence and decency made it nearly impossible for her to get away with the kinds of sensuous folly men could heedlessly enjoy and indulge. Therefore, the necessary fall of the female rake in both Behn and Haywood's fictions represents an endeavor for female authors to still be publishable while attempting to navigate the realm of female sexuality and taking this delicate, censured private notion into public life. While the actuality of the female rake might not be entirely plausible, her presence in literature nonetheless enabled readers to ascertain a new feminocentric perspective in literature,

exposed societal gendered hypocrisies, and, in turn, allowed women “a sense of involvement in the outside world—which for all its dangers and disappointments, had great advantages over restrictive domesticity” (Bowers 62).

Ultimately, by inverting the roles of men and women in amatory fictions, both Behn and Haywood were instrumental in opening up a space in literature for the desiring female perspective to be acknowledged and signified. Rather than creating a new kind of female sensuality, however, Behn and Haywood invert the typical aggressive predator-prey structure and power dynamic of Early Modern patriarchal courtship through the “female rake” in order emphasize the craft and wit of the female individual, but dually call awareness and perhaps critique to the double standards of moral behavior expected by men and women in love. In this way, both *Fantomina* and *Miranda* embody the notion of the female rake, a characterization that touches upon the gender codes and politics of Early Modern fiction and attempts to work through the double bind of Eros that amatory fiction put young women in. As Bowers contends, the proper approach to works such as these, thus, is not to judge them by a “good” or “bad” literary standard, or whether they are worthy of the literary canon, but instead to ask “how our capacity for pleasure might be augmented by respectful engagement with works we have been trained to resist or dismiss” (70). By refusing to downplay the lustful aspects of love in both sexes, intrepidly prescribing these sensuous passions to women as well, these authors have often been scandalized, villainized, and criticized—both in the past and present. Yet, their powerful insights into the perspective of the desiring, loving female subject have helped pave the way for other female writers to describe the realistic, uncensored experience of the female in love, in lust, and in life. This leaves a powerful legacy in women’s literature and in culture, as their “bad” characters are able to find autonomy in their “nastiness,” to

reclaim certain roles otherwise limited to them and subsequently empower themselves and women's writing. Thus, much like Behn herself, these characters find power in owning their sexuality, their stereotypes, and their "masculine" parts – most prominently, the pen.

III. The Nasty Woman Of Modernity: Virginia Woolf

a. THE BIG, BAD WOOLF: ADVOCATING A SPACE FOR WOMEN'S CREATIVITY

"The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me.

The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing?" – Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In this final section is a turn to the Modern period, in which prolific modernist author Virginia Woolf [1882-1941] helped illuminate the farcical illusion of women's equality in modernity and dually emphasizes the female experience within the realm of literature. In the 1920's, while suffrage movements and the age of the "New Woman" did help progress women's rights, and allowed women perhaps more freedoms than ever before, certain damaging patriarchal norms and ideologies remained firmly engrained in Western culture. Particularly, Woolf's work *A Room of One's Own* was a revolutionary feminist milestone, as it eloquently articulated the circumstances of the modern woman when faced with misogynistic discourse.

Like Pizan, the wording of the title of her work is particularly invocative of her forthcoming denunciation of patriarchal values and ideologies since, as literary critic Jane Goldman points out, the title "not only signifies the declaration of political and cultural space for women, private and public, but the intrusion of women into spaces previously considered the spheres of men" (75). Moreover, this "room" seems to stand as an underlying metaphor for a

space, a shelter, for women's self-expression, but also as a space in which women could cultivate their own identity, and ways of writing separate from the typical, traditional modes of the man – which Woolf was incredibly instrumental within her fictional career, employing such methods as free indirect discourse, etc. As Goldman argues, women have had little to do with the ways in which gendered roles have been divided in society, as even the “category of women is not chosen by women” and “it represents the space in patriarchy from which women must speak and which they struggle to redefine” (78). Woolf's chief aims as a “nasty” woman in writing *A Room of One's Own* seem to be to find a voice of her own in the literary world, to advocate for women's ingenuity and creativeness and explain women's seemingly inferior triumphs, and to express the need for a literary language “appropriate for women to use when writing about women” in order to carve out a space for women's expression (78). Thus, as Woolf reflects on both women's continual oppression in both the past and present, she seems to tie together many of the ideas in the works previously discussed in this paper, while leaving lasting, powerful sentiments of her own.

Woolf ultimately argues that the vastly different and unequal circumstances and expectations of women throughout history have inhibited women's ability to write, even if they possessed the genius to do so. Woolf dually makes a powerful point about the institutionalized patriarchal codes that are threaded throughout our society, and how gender norms hinder a woman's ability to participate or reach her full or greatest potential. One of the most moving parts of her essay is when she speaks about how men believe that if they proclaim something, it must be so, sarcastically proclaiming, “How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot

write the plays of Shakespeare” (Woolf 46). She then ingeniously approaches this claim by discussing the idea propagated by men that women do not have the abilities to write such grand works as Shakespeare (yet mentions in previous paragraphs, too, the paradox of women’s relationship to literature, as they are represented as highly central within the text itself, yet cast aside in reality as “insignificant”), revealing the domineering patriarchal perception of male authority and control within society, and thus reflected in literature. While the more common argument of the period was that there was no real women’s literary history or wholly impressive works by women merely because of their intrinsically inferior creative capabilities, Woolf takes the contrary stance. Rather, “it would have been impossible” for women’s work to rival men’s achievements, she purports, not because they were lacking in the potential, but because they were not afforded any of the same advantages, education, etc., as women were merely expected to marry and bear children throughout history (56). To demonstrate this, she cites the lack of diverse characters women have played in the literature of men as part of the reason women have been oppressed from reaching such literary acclamation: “Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer! We might perhaps have most of Othello; and a good deal of Antony; but no Caesar, no Brutus, no Hamlet, no Lear, no Jaques—literature would be incredibly impoverished, as indeed literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women” (62).

This exclusion of women from certain roles, particularly spheres of higher knowledge, are highlighted throughout Woolf’s work, and she skillfully interweaves the anguish and struggle

women of prior periods could have felt—precisely because there is a lack of facts to rely on to build a different narrative—and stresses how these constructed codes of women’s inferiority would have been eventually internalized by women as well, damaging and oppressing even the most brilliant women throughout history. This is exemplified in her example of Shakespeare’s sister “Judith,” who she describes could have been just as talented in writing as Shakespeare, yet because she was a woman, never could have reached the acclaim of her brother and thus died in obscurity. Judith stands for the “silenced woman writer or artist,” yet is dually “a figure who represents the possibility that there will one day be a woman writer to match the status of Shakespeare, who has come to personify literature itself” (Goldman 78). Therefore, she is the embodiment of the struggles of women’s writers in the past, but also stands as a testament to the hope for women’s writers in the future.

Woolf’s overarching, repeated solution to rebutting the patriarchal codes of her society is through women’s education, specifically through literature. She describes the infuriating persistence of men to keep education out of women’s reach, explaining, “Possibly, when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority. That was what he was protecting rather hot-headedly and with too much emphasis, because it was a jewel to him of the rarest price” (33). She rebuts this sexist monopoly on knowledge by declaring emphatically the right for all human beings to learn, to read, to write, and to create—as these things are fundamental and individual entirely to the human experience. “Literature is open to everybody,” she declares, “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (28). Woolf believed that education was the key tool to success—so long as

women were so staunchly denied this, as her fictional character was denied entry into Oxbridge's library in the text, so long would women be held back from their greatest achievements.

Woolf herself was exactly the educated, fierce, intelligent, and wealthy woman that misogynists feared most, precisely because she had her own means and her own wits, thus taking these stereotypes of women who protest men as being "bad women" and using them to empower women's voices. Once a woman is educated, she believed, she must have then certain basic tools in order to thrive: "money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (21). Woolf's claims emphasize how women were routinely bound to the inferiority prescribed to them by men precisely because they had little opportunity or authority to challenge or rectify their situations, in which they were typically legally and financially obliged to their husbands or fathers, and thus denied such basic freedoms. These revolutionary assertions by Woolf ultimately recast the accomplishments of women in a more frank, yet more positive light, as it called attention to the notion that women had been confined in their intellect, and thus, in their potential, and consequently by no fault of their own were limited in the scope and quality of their success. Woolf proves with her own work of fiction, *A Room of One's Own*, that women could write with stunning eloquence and adroitness, thus adding her voice to these other "nasty" women that have contested this misogynistic culture in society, (re)claiming a space and a language for women in literary culture, and assisting in redefining and building women's literary tradition.

A. Conclusions: Time's Up, Misogyny

"Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength." – G.D. Anderson

Ultimately, the primary question remains: how do we as advocates of and for women fight misogyny in the “Trump and Weinstein” era, a period in which misogyny seems to be becoming more normalized and circulated by powerful men than objected to and denied? By looking at these texts, I believe that the common thread of thought among all these equally “nasty” women is that women’s most powerful weapon against misogyny is language, and how she can use it to her advantage. This skillful use of language to counter misogynistic attacks, to reclaim men’s slurs against women into powerful agents, or by redefining the very social mores and codes that limit our potentials and abilities comes from necessarily educating women. Educating people delivers them from the servitude of ignorance and engenders progress, allowing them to perceive the world in new ways and empathize with one another, while literature specifically allows one to put their mind in relation with and to another human beings’. Thus, women’s ability to tell and write their stories, to voice their opinions and beliefs in logical and articulate ways, to renegotiate the gender contracts of our culture and to enter into these conversations with men who attempt to silence and belittle women into submission requires that women have a working knowledge of the rhetoric that confines them. Through the written word, through creation, through imagination, through oratory storytelling, etc. women can pave new pathways and ideologies to further advance women’s literature and women’s equality.

Each of the texts explored in this paper—the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, “The Introduction,” “Preface to “The Lucky Chance,” “The Fair Jilt,” *Fantomina*, and *A Room of One’s Own*—directly internalize, reinterpret, and then interact with language and formulate responses to misogynistic literature, stereotypes, and expectations, creating a powerful conglomeration of women’s voices each using similar, though often different

and profoundly unique, techniques to achieve the same ends – that is, reclaiming women’s agency, reappropriating defamatory and maliciously intended labels to be emboldening and enlightening, and redefining women’s history and women’s place in literary culture. By continuing to educate women, we can provide them the creativity and the ability to imagine new truths for themselves, new realities, and new ways of defending themselves through the very rhetoric that attempts to imprison them. Thus, women can fashion new opportunities for themselves, along with new visions of better and more egalitarian lives. In this way, we can hopefully prompt a culture of tolerance and equality rather than a culture that validates the oppression of women’s voices, that hates, shames, violates, and harms women, and that turns a blind eye to the struggles of countless women around the world. As Oprah Winfrey exquisitely put it in her 2018 speech at the Golden Globes while discussing the “#TimesUp” movement, “I want all of the girls... to know, that a new day is on the horizon. And when that new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women... fighting hard to make sure that they become the leaders who take us to the time when nobody ever has to say ‘me too’ again.” Therefore, by educating women—and all people—about how to define misogyny, how to identify it, and how to not only cope with but actively combat it, the “nasty” women of contemporary culture can continue to wear this name proudly, as they will triumph over the imposing male intimidators that threaten to drown them out.

Did you hear that, misogyny?

Looks like your time is just about up.

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