

Reading the Wife of Bath by the Light of Madonna
or
An Anachronistic Post-Modern Reading of a Post-Medieval Text

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I'm not sure why I went to see *Truth or Dare*, in the first place. Maybe it had something to do with the supposed appeal of popular culture: "the joy of surrender, the guilty pleasure of being taken in" ("Dominatrix of Discourse"). For the sake of academic discourse let's just say I was there to be entertained, to be amused, maybe even to be slightly shocked. Certainly I was out of the classroom, out of the study, out of the house, and willing to surrender to something--whatever it was. But for an academic, I'm not certain surrender is ever complete. The irony cells in the brain, the ones that register incongruity and discrepancy have no "off" switch. Once the rocku- docudrama began I found myself not so much surrendering to popular culture as being aware of watching it, partaking of it--creating it.

Black and white footage of Madonna on a chaise speaking directly to the camera of the previous night's farewell party for the Blond Ambition Tour precedes the opening credits. Her voiceover then narrates flashback scenes of her cleaning up the post-party bottles and glasses, then moves further back in time to the tour's beginning. The first color sequence opens with a wide angle shot of audience and stage--it is the opening number of the show. By hydraulic magic Madonna rises center stage through the lighting haze. She begins singing "Express Yourself." She wears a man's suit with a garter belt over the wide leg trousers; the jacket has bold slits cut vertically over the breasts so that stiff brassier cups punch through. A monocle swings from neck chain between the buttoned jacket's lapels. But she also wears headphones, a mike, and a portable powerpack strapped around her waist. Ah Ha! I thought, this is pop culture: voyeurism, music, sex, and high tech!

In subsequent color segments I saw her in more garter belts and teddies grabbing her crotch, and thrusting her hips at the dancers, the stage, or the air, and then singing of religious and familial patriarchal oppression and of respecting yourself. Then in black and white sequences I heard her joking about sex and lovers and saw her passing out rosaries to her dancers, leading circle prayers, and refusing to violate her self-proclaimed "artistic integrity" by changing her show to suit the authorities in Toronto and Rome. And suddenly I thought, this is more than pop culture. This is the Wife of Bath 600 years displaced.

Now, there are some rather obvious similarities that make these two women sisters in a cultural time warp: things ranging from their bold speech and their dress-- I'll trade you fourteenth-century red stockings and spurs for twentieth-century teddies with Brunhilde-styled breast cones-- to their self-defined Christianity. Certainly each is the consummate "Material Girl" of her age. And each repositions the significance of virginity within her culture--Madonna by redefining it as a state of mind as she sings in "Like A Virgin" of feeling "all shiny and new" at the side of a fresh lover; Alisoun by declaring it a choice rather than a command as she concedes, the prize is up for virginity, "Cacche whoso may" (III 76). But more significant, is how each defines her personal sovereignty in terms of sexual power and control. I am struck, too, how in both *Truth or Dare* and *The Wife of Bath's* Prologue and Tale the narrative voice moves from a self-consciously fashioned confessionism to the intimation of wish-fulfilling romance as Madonna performs her concert numbers and Alisoun tells her tale. To illustrate this, let's consider the significances of the black and white, and color sequences of *Truth or Dare* and what they may suggest about the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale.

As E. Deidre Pribram points out in a detailed analysis of the film's formal techniques, Madonna's 1991 *Truth or Dare* defies cinemagraphic categorization: "It is a docudrama of sorts" Pribram explains, "part

documentary, part concert film, part dramatic entertainment" (189). It combines two traditions of concert films: black and white direct cinema techniques that create an understanding or appreciation of a given celebrity through both backstage and onstage footage (*Don't Look Back* 1965) and more recent color filmings of concerts per se (190-91), for example HBO's color taping of the *Blond Ambition show in France*.

The jumpy, grainy black and white segments seem to invite us into Madonna's private life. Often recorded in her hotel room, or dressing room, they offer us a Madonna in bathrobe and towel, in half make-up, in conversations with friends (Sandra Bernhard) and lovers (Warren Beatty), even in conversation with the cameraman himself. They have the feel of single camera shooting and virtually no editing. They make us think of home movies, of intimate sharing with friends.

The color segments, with one exception, are all onstage performances from the *Blond Ambition* show. They have the polish of careful editing and the richness of multiple camera angles. The 16-mm black and white footage and the 35-mm color sequences have entirely separate filming crews--complete with different directors of photography and editors. I point out these differences between the cinematography of the black and white, and color segments to underscore a correlation I see as comparable to the differences in tone, language, and theme between the Wife of Bath's prologue and her tale--differences akin to Alisoun's choice of a romance as a tale to tell, of her now carefully controlled rhetoric, of her gentle persuasion, of her idealized view of gentlesse and individual integrity--differences that belie director Alek Keshishian's claim that he "just used the concert scenes for emotional beats" (Johnson, "Unmasking Madonna"). The dialogue and action recorded in black and white both precisely before and after certain color segments suggest strong interpretative relationships, as the first segway demonstrates.

As noted before, *Truth or Dare* opens the day after the final company party for the *Blond Ambition* tour. Madonna's voiceover quickly takes us back to the opening concert in a Japan so cold and rainy that the troupe perform bundled in tour jackets rather than decked out in costume. We see part of that concert captured in black and white, then as Madonna tells us she looks forward to getting to America and "doing the show the way it was meant to be," the film cuts immediately to a full color, wide angle shot of the audience, stage, and dancers. Let me play this first color segment you.

[TIME 6:30]

Please notice the difference in Madonna's and the female vocalists' and the male dancers' dress.

Notice subservience of men to the women

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Visually, doing the show in the rain and out of costume has the same relation to "doing the show the way it was meant to be" as black and white has to color, as backstage has to onstage, as daily life to performance--can we even say as reality to romance? Remember, the opening number is "Express Yourself," in which a female voice calls for sexual self-determination, reverses female/male power relations--and sexual positions--and collapses barriers between gendered dress while mimicking female erotica in outer-worn underwear and mocking male voyeurism through the uptown monocle. When the number ends, we see a straight cut in black and white of a plane heading, we would suppose, back to the United States; therefore, the musical number we have just seen is out of chronological time even within the flashback of Madonna's recounting of the tour. It serves less as documentation of events as they happened than as comment upon "the way it was meant to be."

This sharp delineation between the realms of offstage and on stage blurs, however, in subsequent concert intervals, suggesting additional significance as two contrasting episodes evidence. One is the color segment I referred to before that is not concert footage. Threatened with arrest in Toronto if she grabbed her crotch in simulated masturbation during her "Like a Virgin" number, Madonna defiantly refuses to change her act, or as she puts it, refuses to violate her artistic integrity. After the concert footage recording her performance, the film shifts--still in color--to a TV anchorwoman reporting Madonna's close call with the Toronto police. I suggest this is the film's way of allowing the artistic integrity of the performance to spill over into real life, while at the same time allowing the reality of "news" to be--please forgive the pun--colored by performance.

Another episode brings the grainy black and white of offstage onstage. The film candidly records Madonna's tense relationship with her father through telephone calls and dressing room encounters. It also records her bringing him onstage in Detroit and singing happy birthday to him--in black and white, suggesting a performance this time more indicative of capitulation than integrity. As we move from the first to the last number of the tour, the cuts between black and white and color become increasingly complex; concert numbers are not necessarily seen in their entirety, some are edited with black and white intercuts or with sounds from backstage and on stage occurring simultaneously (Pribram 194). As Pribram concludes, this change "serves to collapse the spaces that the film so carefully [set] off by defining them initially. We are left with one of the most significant questions posed by the film: What, after all, are the differences between onstage and offstage spaces?" (194).

Without using the words offstage and onstage, how many recent readers of the Wife of Bath's reconciliation with Jankyn and the Old Lady's gift of a beautiful and true self to a reformed rapist husband have not asked the same question? How are we to read Alisoun's statement that after their fist fight, she and her physically and verbally abusive fifth husband lived happily ever after all because he told her she could do as she pleased? How are we to read this especially after realizing the story of the fight grew in the performance of telling as one torn leaf from a book becomes three? After her passionate defense of age, low birth, and poverty, how are we to read the old lady's concession that since she knows her new husband's worldly appetite she will offer him more pleasing options? How are we read this, especially since at the tale's close Alisoun quickly reverts to the contentious tone of her prologue and curses husbands who are niggardly to their wives? "What after all are the differences between onstage and offstage spaces," between tale and prologue? Surely the mundane beauties and delights of real life color the idealism of the tale, just as the the fiction of performance colors the Wife's recounting of her life with her five husbands.

As we meet Madonna reclining on her chaise suddenly speaking directly to the camera apropos of nothing, we meet Alison of Bath as she steps forward to take up a challenge no one has proffered. No endlink clearly elicits its apparent argument for experience over authority, no headlink gives it a situational context. As Marshall Leicester says, the text "springs from a gap in the poem and a blank on the page, a voice begins to speak out of nowhere" (69).

Because they face us head on and just begin by telling us they are going to talk about themselves, we have labeled both women's performances as confessional. The four confessional prologues are a common place in undergraduate Chaucer courses. Early reviews of *Truth or Dare* hailed the film as confessional with headlines such as "Unmasking Madonna: She Bares All in a Documentary" (Johnson), "Madonna! The World's Hottest Star Speaks Her Mind" (Johnson), and "Madonna Bares All" (Magiera). But what does this really mean? It didn't take long for critics like Stanley Kauffmann to be making evaluations such as: "Her frankness [in *Truth or Dare*] seems less compulsive honesty than a campaign to build up a public persona of frankness" (27).

If we listen carefully to Madonna in both the film and various interviews, she tells us much the same herself. For example, in a 1991 *Rolling Stone* interview with Madonna by Carrie Fisher, the two talk openly of relationships with parents, with lovers, even with dildos. Fisher asks--in reference to Madonna's "hanky Panky" routine, which claims, "I enjoy a little spanky"--

What about your whole spanking thing? I don't get that. It's just a joke. I despise being spanked [Madonna replies]. I absolutely detest it. It's play. I say I want to be spanked, but it's like "Try it and I'll knock your fucking head off." It's a joke!

But I saw you on *Arsenio* and you said--

I was just playing with *Arsenio*.

This is a very important piece of news. [Fisher concludes] (part 2, 48)

Unfortunately, Fisher pushes the implications of this "important piece of news" no further; what does it suggest about the very, "candid" "nothing held back" interview she herself is conducting? Where is the line

between play and honesty? What, after all, is veracity within the politics of the signifier as signified?

In both *Truth or Dare* and an MTV interview at the time of the film's debut, Madonna seems willing to suggest that there may be no such line. In a frequently cited episode from the film, Warren Beatty claims that for Madonna there is no offstage, no private, everything is performance, and by inference, therefore, everything is a form of play. Here is the cut as it appeared within the MTV interview with Madonna's response to Kirk Louder's subsequent question about *Truth or Dare* being a "totally honest movie." The setting is a physician's examination of Madonna's failing vocal chords and his inquiry as to whether she would rather continue off camera.

[TIME 1:05]

Surely, this must shade any expectations that anyone might have of *Truth or Dare* presenting us with truth. Nonetheless, Beatty was wrong. For Madonna there is reason to do some things off camera--and *Truth or Dare* is surprisingly honest about this, offering as it were a clue to the film's verity hidden in full view. In a black and white rehearsal segment still interspersed with opening credits, Madonna becomes angered by sound feedback on stage and refuses to continue. She petulantly calls her stagemanager and crew to her and retires to her dressing room for a meeting. As the camera begins to follow her in, she testily slams the door saying "Get out! I'm having a business talk!" The camera may follow her into the bedroom, but not into the boardroom. So, there is reason to do something off camera; it is to control the production of both the concert and confessional persona.

There may be another clue to the performative status of *Truth or Dare* in the episode that gives the film its American title, (its European title is *In Bed with Madonna*). There is a game of truth or dare in which Madonna chooses the dare. The dare is to show how she performs fellatio, which she does most impressively with the tall neck of an empty mineral water bottle--all to the appreciative hoots and hollers of her dancers. By the way in the *Rolling Stone* interview, Madonna tells Fisher that she doesn't care for such activity ("I don't like blow jobs" [part 1, 40]). The point here is not the nastiness of the dare, but the source of this film's title. How do we read the text when it is so framed within the context of a game? A game that chooses a potentially embarrassing dare over truth. And our reading gets all the more troublesome when we look at the context of this game scene within the black and white and color sequences within the film as a whole.

The game appears immediately after the "Vogue" routine from the show. This color performance is interspersed with black and white cuts of Madonna, her dancers, even fans, making voguing gestures similar to those performed in the number (see Pribram 194). Voguing began in the gay culture as a form of subversion of the dominate heterosexual culture (see Mandziuk 179 and Hluchy), but was taken over by Madonna as a means of acting out fantasies of wealth, power, and adoration, of posing and masking, as the song's repetitive refrain "Strike a pose" underscores. If, as Pribram says, "the [color] performance serves as the base of [this] scene, and the black and white cut-aways act as illustrations or snapshots" (194), especially with its immediate cut to the truth or dare game, then the film inevitably blurs the distinctions between performance and reality as posturing becomes the mode of both arenas. This pivotal number, then, casts an ominous light back on the opening number "Express Yourself," for modes of expression seem dangerously close now to mere posturing. Strike a pose. Choose a mask. Take the dare.

[TIME 4.53]

Have I lost the *Wife of Bath* in all of this. Not at all, but when I look back at her now one line echoes throughout her entire text, "for myn entente is nat but for to play" (III 192) She, too, has accepted the game. She wants the free dinner as much as anyone else. She postures, she pronounces, she plays out the challenge of Host, Pardoner, Friar, and Clerk alike. I would certainly second Leicester's assertion that self-presentation is the announced aim of the *Wife of Bath* (65), but I would sing him praises for pointing out that explicitly because it is framed as self-presentation, the text cannot in his words, "offer any certainty about what has the revelatory status of fact in the *Wife's* performance" (66). Her opening number might be "Express Yourself," but her method is to vogue, to strike a pose, whether it be the reprobate feminine exegete, the insatiable

Venusian, the shrewish wife, the jealous wife, or the loving wife.

What I find so amazing in these two self styled performances of confession and romance, separated as they are by 600 years and phenomenological existence is that both express their individuality in terms of sexual autonomy and control. As several critics have pointed out, *Truth or Dare* is a tour de force of Madonna manipulating others' lives, manipulation that she unabashedly refers to as mothering. The most poignant moments of personal revelation in the film come not from the life of Madonna--her affected visit to her mother's grave notwithstanding, but from the recounted rape of her secretary and the confused homophobia of the dancer Oliver. I believe it would be stating the obvious to saying anything about the Wife's manipulation of others. In 600 years no images apart from patriarchal coding have emerged to suggest that self-expression for women may lie in anything other than in images of female sexual voracity or in patterning of male notions of power in which sovereignty remains dependant upon the control of others.

When confronted with the issue of wearing a dog collar in the "Express Yourself" video by Fisher, Madonna responds, "First you see me chained to a bed, then you see me on top of a stairway with these working men below and I'm wearing a suit and grabbing my crotch. Extreme images of women: One is in charge, in control, dominating; the other is chained to a bed, taking care of the procreation responsibilities" (part 2, 48). When confronted with the similar issue in a NightLine interview with Forest Sawyer, Madonna defends herself by proclaiming, "I put myself in those chains. I'm in control."

Madonna may be in control of her chains, but is she chained to images out of her control? When Chaucer looked for the image of a highly gendered female voice, he envisioned it a highly sexual voice. So, too, does Madonna. After the questions of onstage and backstage spaces, the questions of masking and posing, another arises: Is our concept of gender so determined by the history of gender coding that the image of a self-enfranchised woman lies inevitably the mimicked images of auto-orgasmic pleasure and manipulation of others to the service of our pleasure? Well, I suppose we must leave the answer of that to "The Wife of Bath and Madonna, Part II."

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