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*The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Hong Kingston:  
A Bridging of Autobiography and Fiction ·  
Deborah Homsher

READING *The Woman Warrior*, one gets an immediate impression that its writer has worked hard to form the book. Her memories of a Chinese-American girlhood in California are spliced with myths and anecdotes told by her imposing and thoroughly Chinese mother. Chapters are arranged in blocks against opposing chapters, some gaps bridged with cries of self-doubt or victory, while others are left for the reader to interpret. Kingston breaks up time as she breaks up the usual distinctions between fact and fantasy, and in doing so, separates her book from more traditional, chronological autobiographies. Her first chapter relates and then embroiders a story that was told by her mother, Brave Orchid, when Kingston first menstruated. It is a cautionary tale about a real aunt in China who bore an illegitimate child, brought down the village's violence on her house, drowned herself and was then excluded by the retaliatory silence of the family from the comforts that family ghosts expect. Her name was suppressed, all talk of her forbidden. Kingston's second section relates an entirely different tale about Fa Mu Lan, the mythical Warrior Woman. This "talk-story," which was repeatedly chanted by Brave Orchid and her daughter, told of a girl taken to the mountains by a magic bird, who trained herself to become strong in self-discipline and magic and later returned to wreak vengeance on her family's and country's enemies. These introductory myths juxtapose a woman who, as an outlaw, became a victim against a second woman, dutiful and heroic. Kingston jumps from these stories to the central history of her mother in China, then to the tale of another aunt, Moon Orchid, a delicate and giggling old woman who emigrated and ended in madness, broken by the U.S., which Kingston's mother had survived.

Kingston, the narrator, the expected subject of this autobiography, never set foot in China, where her mother was a medical student, nor was she present in Los Angeles, when her fragile aunt received the rebuff that led to her madness. This *distance* of the narrator, this self-effacing quality, contrasts with the intimacy one can sense in reading the book. Kingston links inherited stories with explications and memories of her own. She also works to see these people clearly, trying to construct a picture of her relatives from fragments and to enter their world in much the same way that a sympathetic reader would. She is as involved in this process of learning as we are. Her labor becomes most apparent when we compare the writer's detailed, scenic conjectures about the crises that overwhelmed her aunts in China and Los Angeles with the bare tales which were actually given to her. Her outlawed aunt was raped . . . or no, she was in love, a flirt, who combed her hair into wisps and burned out a freckle;

none of these details can be found in the scare story told by Brave Orchid. Kingston's expansion of that story comes very close to the work of fiction, but it is always done as part of the effort to make her own past and her kinfolk real.

The act of speech is real. It sometimes burned the throat of Maxine, the shy Chinese-American, to speak aloud. The Chinese are taught to keep misfit emotions silent, but words suppressed gain heat; the release of "unspeakables" becomes an act of aggression against the community. Kingston's first action in *The Woman Warrior* is a defiant telling. Her mother said, "You must never tell anyone," yet here the author records the secret story of her No Name aunt, thus breaking the silence which was a deliberate act of punishment against an offender with whom the narrator feels a frightening kinship. With her name forbidden to relatives, the aunt might as well never have lived, for words are vehicles of memory, respect and finally creation; in words Kingston has reclaimed her.

Shared words have also comforted the author. A chant of one's descent line can call the wandering Chinese spirit home. Mother and daughter sang the chant of the Woman Warrior, Fu Ma Lan, as they worked. This was an act of fellowship, and the prose style of the White Tiger chapter beats with confidence. Sentences are comparatively short and frequently begin with the "I" of the strongly active hero, who walks in a supernatural world made familiar by concrete natural objects—water gourds with fibers, rabbits, tree bark, squirrels. The Woman Warrior menstruates, defecates, has a baby and strings up the umbilical cord as a red flag.

Kingston recognizes the power of concrete details embedded in tales of faraway places since her own mother, the shaman, used this technique in order to build China in Stockton, California. To prevent her daughter from becoming a foreign ghost, a non-human thing like the monsters in Stockton who delivered newspapers and picked up garbage, but spoke no recognizable human language, the mother had to raise a China up around her child verbally. This created China had to be enough like the real place so that the child could return smoothly to her homeland. Every Chinese child raised in America tends to become part ghost in the eyes of its immigrant parents: part un-Chinese, unfamiliar, untraditional. There is no linguistic distinction made between ghosts who appear as smokey columns and the flesh and blood American "ghosts" who read gas meters and work at the drug store. What then is real, what is just talk? The question troubles Kingston. She recognizes that the violent Chinese villagers who pillaged the home of her pregnant aunt helped one another "maintain the real" by eradicating misfits, and that her mother's myths tested "our strength to establish realities." Reality is constructed by people acting and speaking. "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living."

When a mother tries to construct China in a foreign place, there are bound to be terrifying gaps waiting for the daughter when she begins to explore a larger world. Gaps, distances, the separations that accompany adolescent rebellion, and secrets, which are gaps in speech, all frighten and challenge Kingston. The beginning and ending of the book deal with separations. The violence of the No Name woman story speaks for the difficulty of binding adolescents and shows a disobedient girl cast out. In the final chapter, young Maxine tortures a silent Chinese girl whom she sees as a partial image of herself; she wants to separate from and punish "herself." Then she attempts to bridge a division by telling all her guilty secrets to her mother. A person must talk out loud to join the community, but somehow the thoughts this girl has alienate her nearly as often as they tie her. She hates the shared phrases about girls—"Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds." "Better to raise geese than girls."—and hates her parents' ink drawings of villagers, after a flood, "snagging their neighbor's floatage with long flood hooks and pushing the girl babies on down the river." She cannot digest the whole of this Chinese system as her mother did: her mother had once bought and owned a girl slave.

It's to be expected that an autobiography of a second-generation American would track down the ramifications of distance, but in *The Woman Warrior*, problems of distance expand beyond topic to influence form. Kingston's use of inherited stories to begin or center most of her chapters creates ambiguity between the close personal and the distant impersonal. Passed through generations, the Fa Mu Lan chant is "impersonal" or "suprapersonal"; it has gained an existence and form of its own, and speaking brings it to life. But what happens when the chant is written down? Kingston, the adult, retrospective writer, is not the confidently chanting child; she sees the child from a distance and remembers her real hope that the magic bird would take her away. It never did. The warrior's story is simultaneously hers and not hers, an influence but also a disappointment. Writing can be a sneaky form of suppressed speech. Kingston writes forbidden secrets, but a reader rarely hears the character of Maxine speaking. As she works with the stories of her relatives, she dramatizes the sense of distance and silence which frequently oppresses her even as an adult. The author has subtitled her book "Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts," rather than "Autobiography of My Girlhood." Memoirs traditionally concentrate on descriptions of meetings with other, famous people. Kingston sometimes regrets, but also employs her role as onlooker, at one point stepping back to look through the eyes of her visiting aunt and examine the messy, ink-stained child, herself. This situation recalls the situation of a fiction writer, who also stands apart from the story by using a narrator to "speak" and judge.

The form of the book is dramatic. Kingston enacts the central problem of her life, that she is not completely Chinese, she is part hovering ghost. Unlike an armchair autobiography told by an older man or woman who has reached

a comparatively secure and contemplative stage in life, this is a laboring book which depends on the act of writing, the juxtapositions of words and tales, to crystallize meanings. The writer gathers concrete objects. She also removes herself a little in order to give the stories a kind of objectivity which she knows to be part illusion. Most important, however, is her method for making people real, which she does by juxtaposing contradictory personality traits of the most important and complex person in the book aside from the narrator—her mother. Brave Orchid tells ugly and good stories, draws pictures of rejected baby girls floating downriver, yet also loves her daughter. She once defended a weak madwoman whom the villagers eventually stoned; she also bought a girl slave. The author presents these contrasts as stories which are blocked side to side and often left without reconciling explanations, a structure that mirrors many of Kingston's own childhood experiences with her mother. Brave Orchid is an artist, a creator, an accomplished eater of carp eyes, a woman capable of standing as a substantial individual while at the same time fitting in with a culture that calls girls "maggots." Unable to imitate her perfectly, Kingston nonetheless imitates many of her techniques.

Norman Holland argues that a reader cannot distinguish fiction from autobiography by internal evidence. However, once a person has been told to expect "truth" or "fiction," one's relationship to the text changes, and this change is partly a matter of distance. Readers "reality test" autobiography by comparing it with their own opinions and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Roy Pascal argues similarly that readers make moral judgments of autobiographical narrators. Autobiographies are at their best, Pascal writes, when they show individuals in "successive collisions with circumstance," so that in the process of reading such a book, one can gain practical wisdom in living. Those events outside the range of the author's experience are outside the range of autobiography, and the critic counsels young men to turn instead to the autobiographical novel for investigations of potential situations.<sup>2</sup> Kingston obviously circumvents these fatherly suggestions by exploring the lives of her female relatives, lives that run far beyond her own experience. This freedom to explore fantasy dramatically many would simply call fiction.

According to Pascal and Holland, readers do not tend to unite with autobiographical "heroes" as they do with fictional heroes; an element of judgment intrudes, so that the "dream alliance" between a reader and a character in fiction becomes much more difficult, or impossible, with autobiographies. This situation creates a paradox important for the discussion. A fiction writer's invisibility and distance from the work allows it to stand on its own; at the same time fiction, thus freed from its progenitor, seems much more intimately adaptable to the involvement of readers. The feeling I get from *The Woman Warrior* is that Kingston constructs a partly fictional world in order to be able to reenter it imaginatively as a reader, someone who is distant enough to see

clearly but is also emotionally involved in the story. This move is very similar to the adaptation of focus any adult must make when looking at someone who was once completely “mother,” but who is now a “person,” with all the hitches and complexities that implies.

A more precise definition of the distinctions between autobiography and fiction, which usually parallels the distinctions between informative as opposed to more artful prose, has been suggested by Kenneth Burke. His analysis of the “psychology of information” as opposed to the “psychology of form” leads him to examine the ways in which art depends on dramatic manipulation of the audience by means of sequential and often juxtaposed forms that are patterned after “psychological universals” like the enjoyment of rest after exertion or the involvement in a mounting crescendo. According to Burke, the more a work depends on psychology of form rather than information, the more it bears repeating; thus music keeps fresh after many repetitions.<sup>3</sup> The point to be made here is not that most autobiographies are artless; certainly what I’ve tagged as a traditional autobiography uses a satisfying form as it moves from childhood to a more firm and often generous old age. But Kingston is more artist than most, and this is partly because of need.

Kingston’s preoccupations with forms and living symbols can be discovered by a simple comparison of chapters. She begins by embroidering the violent story about the nameless aunt who was both outlaw and victim, then follows with the White Tiger myth of Fa Mu Lan, which offers an emotional alternative to the threats and dangers that accompany adolescence. This chant encourages Kingston, for it offers her a new interpretation of her own writing, which does not challenge the laws of the community in this case, but acts with them instead. Like the Woman Warrior, she carries words carved into the skin of her back and will now tell vengeance for her family.

These two different lessons were told by one mother. How does one explain the inconsistencies? Brave Orchid stands in the center of the book and her chapter, the third, ends with a tense and loving dialogue between the nervous daughter and the great, bearish, worried older woman. Kingston has moved regressively from her adolescence, to childhood, to life in China before she was born. Her fourth chapter shifts to a skyscraper in Los Angeles where she has never been. By occasionally taking the viewpoint of her aunt, Moon Orchid, the narrator gains the vision of someone who has stepped fresh off the plane from China; she may now be able to see how her own mother views her. Kingston also manages to compare two immigrants, one a survivor who can heft hundred pound sacks of Texas rice and who works in the dust and steam heat of a laundry, and the other, Moon Orchid, a giggling lady who was crushed by the determined plans of her own strong sister. The author watches the bullying and subsequent tender concern of her mother towards her aunt. She draws conclusions about justifications for force—people must “get tough” to survive here—so she can accept the methods used on her as a child.

The explosion finally comes when Maxine tries to communicate her secrets to her mother, and the simultaneous, babbling screams of the two females recall the dialogue that ended the central section. Her analysis of the difficulties of survival in the U.S. has helped Kingston move towards sympathy; after relating how her mother ordered her to stop "whispering, whispering," she theorizes that this was probably her mother's own quiet time, the one cool space available in the schedule of a hot day. And the book ends with a Chinese singer who, after being captured by barbarians, finally sang love of her lost country. Ts'ai Yen, this singer and poet, part mythic, part historical, offers the narrator an alternative to the Woman Warrior who partly failed her as a child. The poet is also a warrior, so the two mythic forerunners blend.

Kingston constructs her memories into patterns that will educate her to go on. She relies on artfulness and felt comparisons partly because she had been required to build a world from contradictory pieces, but even more, because understanding how the Chinese world fits together means understanding Brave Orchid, the magician who raised the fence around her. People evade explanation, they have many faces and must be examined in layers. A great deal of fiction has been created from the search for "ghosts." Lily Briscoe tries to paint Mrs. Ramsey, who can be found somewhere in the connections between varying personal impressions. Marlow follows the rumors to Kurtz. Nick Carraway hears stories of Gatsby and touches them up to flesh out the man for the sake of his own survival.

It has become commonplace to say that novels do not ask for judgment of characters so much as they try to develop sympathy. Sympathy implies acceptance of complexities, contradictions, social influences. This autobiography embodies the labor of a young woman to develop a large sympathy for her mother, a woman who was able to stride across the ocean when forty years old and then bear six children. Once Kingston can see her mother, she can turn and see herself as an entire and complex adult, rather than as a crazy mosaic of mutually exclusive pieces. Her combinations of fictional and autobiographical techniques make this book quite an experience for the reader, who is invited to participate emotionally in the dramatic scenes and then finds the author sitting alongside, talking and crying. If it is true that we stand back slightly from autobiographies and "reality test" them, it must also be true that the willingness of a person to offer her life to such scrutiny has to be accepted as an act of generosity. Kingston invites singing.

#### NOTES

- 1 Norman Holland, "Prose and Mind: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Non-Fiction," *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. George Levine and William Madden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 314-337.
- 2 Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 2, 10, 168-178.
- 3 Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 33, 45, 48.