Wife Of Bath: Revealing Of Modern Misconceptions Of Medieval Society

In Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, there are many examples of women—patient, amorous or unfaithful—but then there's the Wife of Bath. Her very existence breaks form with modern misconceptions of medieval society and raises questions about her nature as well as the role of women in the fourteenth century. A persistent modern sentiment is that medieval women only had control over domestic matters which is no small chore, with a certain amount of status, but there are several accounts of women having even greater prestige. The fact that Chaucer presents so many different women in his work, who freely voice their thoughts and ideas, suggests that women had a very real role in the society of the late fourteenth century, one not limited to nuns and wives. Chaucer argues through the Wife of Bath that women must have agency in order to achieve gender balance; he reflects the progressive tenor of the late fourteenth century rather than challenging embedded misogyny.

The fourteenth century afforded many different opportunities for women and Chaucer, in his role as a tax collector, diplomat, and soldier would have encountered, interacted with and served every type of them throughout his life. He interacted with women of high birth, the wives and daughters of merchants, (and some who were merchants themselves), widows, and peasant women who worked just as hard as their husbands and sons to make sure that their household could thrive. Chaucer's experience was not unique. Women had far more agency than many modern critics suggest and the Wife of Bath represents the complexity of gender position in fourteenth century England. She is a traveler, a weaver, a business woman with a lust for life – and a widow: "Hose-bins at kirke dore shay hade feeve,/Withouten oother companeea in youthe-" (Chaucer ll 460-61). She is described by Chaucer as being extremely fashionable wearing "coverchiefs ful fena weren of ground" and "hosen wearen of fyn scarlet reeda,/Ful streite e-tied, and shoes ful moyste and newe" (Chaucer ll 453, 456-457) as well as slightly deaf. Widows, like Alisoun of Bath, had a great deal of agency and so many were reluctant to relinquish that authority by taking another husband.

This trend begins as early as the twelfth century, and continued on throughout the Middle Ages. For example, Matilda, wife of Ranulf II Earl of Chester, and the daughter of Henry I's illegitimate son, Robert, Earl of Gloucester retained custody of her six-year-old son Hugh II upon Ranulf's death in 1153. She began to issue charters of her own as well as joint charters with her son. She was an extremely powerful woman. For Chaucer, 200 years after Matilda, independent women were nothing new. In her 1995 book on Medieval Women, Henrietta Leyser argues that "conservative estimates put widows in charge of at least 10 per cent of medieval English households" (Leyser 168). On one hand widows were perceived biblically as objects of respect and charity while on the other they were perceived as promiscuous and greedy. Chaucer addresses this view by extolling The Wife of Bath's virtues as a business woman, showing that she is independently wealthy and a successful clothier, having clothes that rival those of Ypres and Ghent, Flemish cities known for their quality textiles. Widowhood was anticipated, and the law regarding widows was very beneficial. According to the Glanvill, a twelfth century legal text, the term 'at the church door' refers to the act of a man endowing his wife with her dower (Leyser 168). Chaucer, as a government official would have been aware of this legal text in the 14th century and he references this precedent in his description of Alisoun. She has been

married ‘at the church door’ five times, which suggests only one thing, considering the Glanvill, and it’s pretty straightforward— that she has been endowed by each subsequent husband, leading to her wealth.

The fact that she has experience in marriage means that she is more likely to assert her authority over her husband as is evidenced in her Prologue. “But tell may this: why hidestow, with sorwe,/The keyes of thy cheste away fro may?/It is my good as wel as thyn, pardee! […] Now by that lord that is called Seint Jame,/Thou shalt nat bothe, though that thou were/ whoad,/Be master of my body and of my good” (Chaucer ll 308-310, 312-314). She speaks of her trouble with Jankyn when they are newly married, he demands that she give him access to her money saying that it’s as much his as it is hers however, she refuses stating that she’s already given him mastery over her body, he will not have both. The significance of this exchange shows that women who are independently wealthy would have control over their own purse strings as Alisoun does. Chaucer would not have included this development on his own. He, as a tax collector, would have been aware of the inheritance law that made it beneficial for widows to remarry because, as stated by Leyser, “to raise the money necessary to refuse to remarry, the woman might have to sell her one means of support as [a] single woman: her dower” (Leyser 171). Few women would have been willing to sell their dower because, for the most part, it was all she would have been able to live off of.

Chaucer does not challenge any embedded misogyny but is rather reflecting his time period or at least arguing that women need to have agency in order to exist as members of society. Throughout The Canterbury Tales there are women who have strong thoughts and ideas which speaks volumes about medieval society and the role of women within it. Critics have often called Chaucer’s portrayal of women as anti woman, Jill Mann asserts in Feminizing Chaucer that by “giving the antifeminist material to the Wife, and the tale of Griselda, supreme example of the good woman, to the Clerk” (Mann 57), Chaucer is reconciling the fact that he cannot write in the voice of a woman; however, this is problematic considering how he writes the other women in the text. His women aren’t inherently bad or good, they all vary in terms of personality and reflect the world he lives in, one where women had a varied level of liberality and where some, like Alisoun, have a great deal of it and others are, like Griselda, have none. The Wife of Bath does not even challenge masculine institutions; she remarries because it is a safe place for her to be. She can live the life to which she’s grown accustomed. If anything the fact that she is married says more than she’s given credit for because by staying married she exists within the medieval convention. Marriage is a better option than widowhood because the money and land she was endowed with in widowhood would be taken from her unless she remarries quickly and thus the easiest way to stay wealthy is to stay married. Alcuin Blamires writes in Chaucer, Ethics and Gender “that largesse/liberality was not a class-exclusive but had a wide moral scope” (Blamires 132). There was a sense in Chaucer’s time that women throughout the classes should be given a modicum of personal freedoms Blamires explains, “Liberality was thus a virtue delicately poised between parsimony (deficient liberality) on one hand, and prodigality (excess liberality) on the other” (Blamires 132). This means that there were households of varying degrees of liberality, some where the wife had less liberality and others where she had more. This is the basis of medieval marriage – a variable institution itself. Lee Patterson argues that “there is no single institution we can call ‘medieval marriage’” (Patterson 134) which means that the Wife of Bath’s situation was hardly original and its inclusion is indicative of the time period. After all, she’s been married five times and has experienced a wide gamut of marital troubles.

Alisoun is a forgiving person when it comes to sex and relationships; when she mentions her fifth husband she states “And yet was hay to may the moste shrewe./That faile E on my ribbes al by rewe,/And evere shall unto mine ending-die. […] E trowe E loved him best for that he/Was of his love dandross to may” (Chaucer, ll 505-507, 513-514). Since she obviously loves him and enjoys sleeping with him, she wouldn’t leave him and be left without the economic stability of marriage and the potential for yet another dower in widowhood. While this may make it seem as though she’s living up to the stereotype of widows, in truth, she is only thinking of her future which means remarrying because inheritance law of the time deprived the widow of two thirds of her inheritance if she didn’t remarry, while a widow who remarried could keep land she previously forfeited (Leyser 180). If she retains hold of her land or money from her previous dower, then she can use it to supplement her current income, or rather, that of her husband. So, remarrying affords her a certain amount of freedom and agency whereas widowhood would not.

However, Alistair Minnis argues that Alisoun is still confined “within the prison house of masculine language” (Minnis 307). Not because of any masculine argument of Chaucer’s but instead his knowledge that, according to the law of late 14th century, she has a better chance of being well off and well taken care of if she remains in the “male convention” of marriage. In her Prologue, The Pardoner interrupts her: “’Now, dam,’ quod he, ‘by Gode and by Seint John!/Ye been a noble prey-chore in this cahs’” (Chaucer ll 163-165). Minnis asserts that The Pardoner is mocking her, that he was “about to ‘wedde a weef’ but now, he declares, she has put him off the idea. […] he urges her to continue with her narrative, to ‘teche us yonge men of your praktike’” (Minnis 252). However, rather than mocking Alisoun, The Pardoner sees her interpretation of holy writ to be as self-serving as one of his own sermons. However, he’s mistaken in this case as Alisoun is not being self-serving; she is merely espousing her own interpretation of biblical text. She, unlike the Pardoner, is not trying to get anything from anybody because she already has what she wants from her husband, freedom.

The wife travels freely on her own, making her way on pilgrimages to Rome (twice), Bologna, Cologne and St. James of Compostella. She has the money to go to mainland Europe relatively frequently, and the freedom to travel without her own companions. Jankyn does not seem to travel with her suggesting that she is a lot more ‘wel at ese’ than originally thought. She is an experienced wanderer and this is reflected in her tale. She travels for pleasure and her knight is traveling for a specific purpose, because she has discovered the truth of gender balance and he has not.

The theme of Alisoun’s tale is the idea of gender balance and it is reinforced throughout. The tale opens with a young knight, Gawain, raping a peasant girl. While the crime is reprehensible, the fact that Gawain, a noble, is brought to trial is an interesting turn on modern views of medieval law and culture because his victim was a peasant and therefore less likely to engender a response from the nobility. The punishment for rape varied throughout the medieval period; according to Corinne Saunders “English rape law is characterized by a complex pattern of development that builds on its Anglo-Saxon heritage, but reflects as well Norman influence.” (Saunders 75). However, in this case it’s pretty clear that he raped the woman. The interesting part about the Tale is that Arthur immediate defers to Guinevere and the women; “And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,/To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille.” (Chaucer ll 897-898). Guinevere exercises her power which indicates a balance between the genders at least it exists between Guinivere and Arthur which is not to say that it didn’t exist in the real world. Guinevere suggests that Arthur’s best knight do what he does best and go on a quest to find out “What thing is it that woman moost desieren” (Chaucer, 905). The fact that Arthur

allows this indicates that, as Susan Crane writes, “Arthur’s justice is tempered through the queen’s mercy” (Crane 119). But it is far more likely that Gawain is set on this quest to give him hope of saving his life. Guinevere knows that there is no way that a normal woman would tell him straight out what it is that women want most and therefore he’s consigned to failure and execution. Luckily for Gawain he is saved from execution by an old hag, The Loathly Lady, who tells him the secret that he seeks with the promise of his granting her any desire in return. Her only desire is to be married to Gawain who, understandably runs away however when he learns of her beauty and what she wants, he gives her the choice of what she wants to do even after she let him choose. Angela Weisl asserts that The Loathly Lady “is the exact opposite of the standard romance heroine throughout most of the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” and that she “must become ideal for the poem to end.” (Weisl 3). Weisl’s definition of the ‘standard romance heroine’ is a beautiful, silent woman. However, for the Loathly Lady to conform to Weisl’s ideal then she would be silent and she’s not, she still voices her opinion. She knows that she can assert her own power and that they, that is, Gawain and The Loathly Lady, both make decisions within the marriage that would benefit the two of them. The fact that there are now at least three women in the text who have power if not over her husband then with her husband that it points towards the idea that a woman making decisions regarding the household and what to do therein is a common sight. This means that Chaucer is using the Wife of Bath to show the benefits of a “truly companionate marriage” as Patterson asserts. (Patterson, Putting the Wife in Her Place 33).

The Wife of Bath has been a polarizing figure among literary critics for years and will likely continue to be for years to come. The fact that she maintains an independent lifestyle means that she has the money necessary to afford the expenses of travel making her on par with any of the men on the Canterbury Pilgrimage. Her views of marriage add to her polarizing nature because how could a woman who interprets the Bible in a time when only the clergy could know Latin and read the Bible be anything but polarizing? She is a fantastic example of a strong female character who knows exactly what she wants in life and is not afraid to not only go out and get it but to let everyone whether they care or not know what it is that she wants. This combined with her tale shows the benefits of the 14th century for men and women in that they are in several ways equal to one another.

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