

CC 4 Semester II

British Poetry and Drama : 14th to 17th Centuries

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Female 'soveraynetee' in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale'

Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, is one of very few women pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's unfinished collection of poems, *The Canterbury Tales*, and the only secular female voice (the others being a nun and the Prioress), but she is arguably the most memorable and voluble speaker. With a prologue twice the length of her own tale, her character is one of Chaucer's most significant creations, although his perspective of her outspoken views on marriage, power and religious doctrine remains ambiguous.

'Experience' and 'auctoritee'

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage
(ll. 1–3)

The Wife of Bath's prologue details her experience of sex and marriage as a woman who has had 'housbondes ... fyve' since the age of 'twelve' (ll. 4–6). It is on the basis of this personal 'experience' that she sets herself up from the beginning of her prologue as an authority on marriage, in contrast to written, and by implication male, 'auctoritee[s]' – an immediately controversial stance since books and the written word were highly valued as sources of knowledge and learning in medieval rhetoric. This dichotomy between female (spoken and subjective) experience and male (written and seemingly-objective) 'auctoritee' is a recurring theme in her prologue.

Alisoun seems well-versed in the literature of the period, so the value she places on her own experience is grounded in her familiarity with these texts. Chaucer has Alisoun question male written 'auctoritee', even including that most revered source in late medieval Christian England: the Bible. The Wife has been 'toold' that since 'Crist ne wente nevere but onis / To weddyng ... That [she] ne sholde wedded be but ones' (ll. 9–13). But her multiple widowhoods are a key source of her prosperity and, as she points out, make her a desirable match. The Wife takes this interpretation of the Bible to task, arguing that 'Men may devyne and glosen', interpreting religious texts to suit their views, and so does she:

'But wel I woot, expres, withouten lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.
Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbunde
Should lete fader and mooder and take to me.
But of no nombre mencion made he'
(ll. 27–32)

The emphatic language 'expres, withouten lye' and the repetition of 'wel I woot' and 'I wel

understoude' underlines the Wife's determination to have her personal reading of the Bible taken seriously, questioning that if God made no 'mencion' of a particular 'nombre' of husbands for a woman, 'Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye?'(l. 34). This questioning of male, clerical interpretation, particularly in the setting of a religious pilgrimage, sets Alisoun up as a controversial, or mock, preacher of sorts, satirically sermonising in favour of multiple marriages and against virginity, in a counter-narrative to the pious teachings of the day.

On the one hand, her fellow pilgrims might find her a figure of ridicule in her search for loop-holes in Biblical 'auctoritee' and her cherry-picking of religious maxims to suit her argument – the instruction to 'wexe and multiplie' hardly condones re-marriage. Yet, even by giving Alisoun the voice to question masculine ecclesiastical authority over religious texts, Chaucer subverts medieval notions of male power. Alisoun's insistence that 'I kan nat seyn' what the Biblical story of the Samaritan with five husbands might mean (ll. 15–25) places the 'I' of her personal interpretation as central to her understanding of the text. As her question 'How manye [husbands] myghte she have' (l. 23) is met with no 'nombre diffinicioun' (l. 25), she demands to know 'why ... men thanne speke', placing her subjective experience on an equal footing with the interpretations of male scholars, a bold challenge to their authority and to the supremacy of the written word.

The painted lion

Similarly, though Alisoun might be mocked for her independent-minded boldness, almost monstrous by medieval ideals of femininity, those very ideals are, as Chaucer has her point out, the work of men:

Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.
(ll. 692–96)

This image of a painted lion reminds us that the object of much male discussion and religious doctrine is the behaviour of women, but women, like painted lions, are unable to create their own portraits, either of themselves or of men. Chaucer, through Alisoun, draws attention to this central inequality in medieval society and male control over both 'written stories' and 'oratories'. With literary and rhetorical power in the hands of men, there is no recourse for women to portray equivalent male 'wikkednesse'. This insight may be seen as proto-feminist – a rallying cry to question the social order – yet in Alisoun's mouth it is also ambiguous, undermined by her cheerful assertions of her own wrongdoings and female dishonesty: 'For half so boldly can ther no man / Swere and lyen as a womman can' (ll. 227–28). Her deceitful 'wikkednesse' towards her husbands is balanced against her claims that, in male-dominated medieval society, a woman has no other means to 'redresse' the balance of power.

While Alisoun's arguments may be discredited by her crude boasts and by their illogical, tangential progression, reflecting negatively on female speakers, her imaginative creation in her tale, the old hag, does offer a compelling argument on the topic of gentility:

Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
Privee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he kan,
Taak hym for the grettest gentil man.
Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,

Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse.
(ll. 1113–18)

The imperatives 'Looke' and 'Taak' suggest a confident speaker in spite of the hag's low status, and the listing of superlative 'vertuous' qualities build logically and persuasively to the couplet arguing that 'gentil dedes' make 'the grettest gentil man' rather than 'eldres' or 'richesse'. Finally, in drawing on 'Crist' as an 'auctoritee' she drives home her point with the most respected, and male, source. Her character is thus subversive, gaining mastery through her rhetorical skill over not only a man, but a nobleman. As the fictional creation of a fictional creation, this 'loathly lady' is distanced enough from Chaucer's wealthy intended readership to allow him to question patriarchal and class structures through her character.

Battle of the sexes

The Wife's spirited crusade against male 'auctoritee' is most evident in her literal, physical battle against her most challenging husband, Jankyn the 'clerk of Oxenford'. He torments her nightly by reading from a book of 'wikked wyves': a treatise of anti-feminist authorities that he reads for his 'desport' (l. 670) and at which he would 'lough alwey ful faste' (l. 672). It is clear that this is a misuse of 'auctoritee' – not for education or piety but for mockery and to torment Alisoun. Our sympathies therefore lie with her before she reveals how she took matters into her own hands:

'I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil backward adoun'
(ll. 792–93)

The irony is that, in tormenting his wife with tales of female wickedness, Jankyn drives her to the very behaviour the male authorities condemn. But it is he who is burnt by fire, perhaps symbolic of hellish punishment. In his retributive anger, he knocks Alisoun to the floor, but again, she quite literally gains the upper hand, tempting him over, 'Er I be deed, yet wole I kisse thee' (l. 802), and then, as he begs forgiveness:

And yet eftsoones, I hitte hym on the cheke,
And seyde, 'Theef, thus muchel am I wreke;
Now wol I dye, I may no longer speke.'
(ll. 808–10)

That she would rather give him one last thump than forgive him is both comically un-Christian for her pilgrim audience and triumphant in its sudden cunning, as emphasised by the abrupt monosyllables of 'I hitte hym on the cheke', striking a last blow for womanhood rather than compromising. Unable to write 'stories' or 'oratories' or even 'speke', the Wife lets her fists have the last word.

'Maistrie' and 'soveraynetee'

The 'moral' of Alisoun's confession is that, having proved herself a match for Jankyn both physically and in cunning, he 'yaf me al the bridel in myn hand' (l. 813): she takes the reins in the relationship, gaining 'maistrie' and 'soveraynetee' (l. 818) over her husband. This victory of a wife over her lord and master, as husbands were seen in the eyes of society, if not in their own households, seems a subversion of the medieval order – possibly to the point of farce. The Wife may be seen as a symbol of the carnivalesque, a temporary and amusing up-ending of social norms.

It is fitting, then, that her tale is set in a distant, fairy-tale world rather than her immediate society. It

is equally appropriate that her tale deals with those elements so central to Alisoun's character: sex and violence – here in the form of rape committed by a knight.

The tale seems to drive home the Wife's message: the 'loathly lady' saves the knight from execution by providing the answer to his quest to seek what women most desire:

'Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above.'
(ll. 1038–40)

The words 'sovereynetee' and 'maistrie' echo the Wife's prologue, emphasising the importance she places on female dominance in relationships. Yet Alisoun's tale is hardly straightforward in its depiction of female power, with the rape ultimately going unpunished. Though the knight is forced to marry the degradingly common hag, upon gaining a promise that she shall have 'maistrie' in all things, she rewards him by transforming into a young, beautiful woman. The story concludes with the knight's 'herte bathed in a bath of blisse' (l. 1253), the alliteration emphasising his sensual pleasure as his new wife 'obeyed hym in every thing / That myghte doon hym plesance' (ll. 1255–56), implying her sexual obedience. While this argument for giving women power may be persuasive for the Wife's audience, it is an argument based on male enjoyment, not on the importance of gender equality.

Similarly, the Wife's focus in the prologue is often on the pleasure she gives men, boasting 'trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me, / I hadde the beste quoniam' (ll. 608–09). Her pride in her sexual prowess is both comic and indicative of her lusty 'appetit' (l. 623), yet it also suggests the importance to her of being sexually prized. She vows:

In wyfhode I wol use myn instrument
As frely as my Makere hath it sent
If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
Myn housbond shal it have bothe eve and morwe.
(ll. 149–52)

The oath to God against being 'daungerous' emphasises her willingness to be faithful, once she has her own way. The description of her genitals as 'myn instrument' suggests their use as a tool for keeping husbands interested and in 'thral' (l. 155), as much as for her own pleasure, as emphasised by her potentially exhausting regimen of sex 'bothe eve and morwe'!

Although the Wife and the 'loathly lady' both clearly advocate 'maistrie' for women, the prologue and tale are problematic from a feminist viewpoint. Both Alisoun and the hag could be seen as objectifying women, offering their bodies as a sexual reward in exchange for control. The Wife's self-awareness of her own socially outrageous behaviour does, however, create a layer of irony around her character, leaving it ambiguous as to whether she is a virago, a figure of ridicule and disgust, or a satirical tool for Chaucer to expose the conflict between public ideals and private realities of the

relationships between men and women.