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NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE

Topic: Female 'sovereignty' in Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Prologue

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Female 'sovereignty' in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue'.

Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, is one of the 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 'authority' (Lines 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' [authority] is a recurring theme in her prologue.

Alisoun seems well-versed in the literature of the period, so the value she places on her experience is grounded ~~on her experience~~ 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 weddynge --- 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,
— — — — — — —
— — — — — — —
— — — — — — —
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 understounde' 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 multiplye' 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 point out, the work of men:

Who peynte the leon, tel me who
— — — — — — — — —
— — — — — — — — —

Thanne 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 'writen ~~so~~ 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 a 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 boldely Can ther no man / Swere and lyen as a woman 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.

Date
Page

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 'laugh 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 our 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:

(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' (1.813): she takes the ~~reigns~~ reins in the relationship, gaining 'maistrie' and 'soveraynetee' (1.818) 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. The words 'soverenetee' and 'maistrie' echo the Wife's prologue, emphasising the importance she places on female dominance in relationships. Again, 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 best quoniam' (11.608–09). Her pride in her sexual prowess is both comic and indicative of her lusty 'appetit' (1.623), yet is also suggests the importance to her of being sexually prized. She vows:

11.149 – 152

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' (1. 155), as much as for her own pleasure, as emphasised by her potentially exhausting regimen of sex 'bothe eve and morwe'!

Although the Wife of Bath clearly advocate 'maistrie' for women, the prologue is problematic from a feminist viewpoint. Alisoun could be seen as objectifying woman, offering her body 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.