



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindasvið

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*Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Her Fear of Losing Her Outer Beauty*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Hildur Seljan Indriðadóttir

Maí 2010

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## Summary

In this essay the fears of the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are examined. The Wife of Bath is one of Chaucer's most curious characters. Her obsession with marriage is looked at, as well as her history of former husbands. The status of women during the Middle Ages, and their rights are briefly displayed. She comes off as a strong and independent woman who has a lot to say, but at heart she is insecure and desperate for love. Having already been married five times and at the age of 40, the Wife of Bath is looking for husband number six. She never had trouble finding a husband, but now her looks are failing her, and she knows that men are easily drawn to beauty. The Tale that the Wife of Bath tells her company is examined from her perspective. She changes her Tale and also passages from the Bible to her own advantage, and the reason for this is to appeal to the inner beauty. This essay will argue that the Wife of Bath only tells her Tale to appeal to men's ability to look beyond women's appearance. The reason for her doing this is because she is no longer a beautiful, young woman, but, as mentioned before, is on the lookout for a new husband. Her character is studied; how a woman dares to be so bold and honest during the Middle Ages, and demand respect from both men and women equally. She wants a husband, but also a complete mastery over him, and what she wants, she goes after.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was written at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but left unfinished. It is set up as many stories within a story. The main frame is a travelling group of pilgrims journeying from Southwark to see the shrine of Saint Thomas of Beckett at the Canterbury Cathedral. As the journey begins, the pilgrims are introduced and also a game that has been set up, where each pilgrim is to tell two stories. The Wife of Bath, or Alisoun, is perhaps the most interesting character among the pilgrims. She struggles with an inner conflict between wanting sovereignty and wanting to be loved. Alisoun tells the longest prologue of the pilgrims which allows the reader to get a glance of her life and frame of mind.

The Wife of Bath has been married five times already when the journey begins and is about 40 years old. She is obsessed with men and marriages. Although she has more power as a person when she is a widow, she prefers to be married, for it profits her more. The reason is that she is a woman of trade and therefore she needs a considerable amount of good connections. Alisoun will do almost anything to get to the altar for the sixth time. She knows that beautiful young women can easily name their price and choose from a number of wealthy suitors.

Alisoun is getting older and her looks are probably failing her. Knowing what she knows she worryingly fixates on outer beauty as a hindrance now, which brings with it more and more desperation and inner conflict. Therefore, while she does not believe her own Tale, she tries to appeal to the male audience by turning her fable into a moral lesson. Both the prologue and the tale deal with relationships between the sexes. She uses both as examples of how women can have mastery over men, firstly with her prologue and her own experiences and secondly with her tale. Alisoun tries to make men see that when it comes to true love, appearance shouldn't get in the way. Alisoun, in her selfish act, uses her tale to convince men to look beyond women's outer beauty. Her object is to get her sixth husband despite the fact that her looks have faded.

Growing up as a woman during the Middle Ages was not easy. Life for most of them would consist of one thing: serving the men around them. According to Judith Slover in *Chaucer's Pilgrims* "...women were identified by their roles in life as wives, widows, mothers, or maidens ... Thus they were effectively reduced to the status of chattel, allowing them little autonomy" (Slover 243).

A married medieval woman was ordered by the Church to obey her husband in every way and to live as his helpmate. If that was not humiliation enough, women were either constantly reminded of the original sin committed by Eve or being compared with the perfect Virgin Mary. There seemed to be only two types of women; sinners or saints, at least in the eyes of the church in medieval times. Frances and Joseph Gies display these views in their book *Women in the Middle Ages*: "Preachers tirelessly repeated the tale of Eve's beguiling Adam, while elevating the Virgin Mary to the status of a cult" (Gies and Gies 37).

Women were thought to be inferior to men during these times, both physically and mentally, and therefore could only seek employment in terms of physical labour. The only way to avoid this situation was if they would serve God as nuns. Women had neither legal identities nor rights unless they committed a crime. It was always the nearest male relation that ruled over all of their decisions and belongings, whether it was the father, the brother or the husband. The only way to gain any right and possession during the Middle Ages was if a woman happened to become a widow.

These struggles of the female race seem to have little effect however on Alisoun who goes her own ways. The Wife of Bath marries at the young age of twelve to her first husband, who provided well for her. She never has to experience the harshness of hunger or poverty which many people in the Middle Ages had to go through. The arrangement of marriages was common back then and choosing a husband for oneself was mostly unheard of.

Alisoun is considered a worthy wife and she was probably a beauty at a younger age. About her outer appearance, Chaucer says that she was gap-toothed, which was a sign of promiscuity in medieval times. She has large hips which she covers with an overskirt and on her feet she wears red socks, which was the colour for aristocracy (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 31). His choosing of body parts to describe is interesting, as they are all very sexually suggestive at that time. Jane Chance says, in her book *The Mythographic Chaucer: the Fabulation of Sexual Politics*, that Alisoun's desire to be young and beautiful again leads to her talk of her own sexual wants. She shares with her fellow company her idea of identifying herself with the planet Venus, which is associated with sexual desires. She reveals that she has a birthmark, the print of Saint Venus's seal, which is supposed to be in a hidden place (Chance 216-217). This is all very sexual and not many women were as open about these desires at that time. Chaucer also informs his reader that she belongs to the middle class but did not seem to mind wearing the colour for the upper classes. She thinks that she should be considered as a lady.

Chaucer seems to make the Wife of Bath stand out deliberately from the rest of the party; she is perhaps one of his most debatable characters for her contradictions in what she says and what she does. His creation of her has one major purpose and that is to shock his readers. Chaucer decides to take every bad characteristic that women were supposed to have in these days and the outcome is Alisoun. Such vivacity and boldness was not often seen in female fiction characters.

The Wife of Bath overcomes the antifeminism that thrived in the medieval times in her own way, which is that she is proud to be a woman. As Kenneth J. Oberembt points out in his article "Chaucer's Anti-Misogynist Wife of Bath"; she has anti-misogynist views; she believes that the position of Eve was higher than that of Adam's. She seems also to be

bothered with the whole natural order of God's appointing men above women (Oberembt 287).

Chaucer never reveals whether the Wife of Bath is mainly a comic character or if she is to be taken seriously or if she is voicing his own opinions. He seems to make her contradict herself in some views concerning misogyny, and she has been taking criticism concerning it ever since. However, recent critics have shown her more tolerance and blamed Chaucer: "... Chaucer the author could be seen to making a subtle attack on the character of the Wife when she is made to include misogynist tenets in her own prologue. Still, by and large, the New Critics were more sympathetic towards the Wife, seeing her as a comic figure, manipulated by the author" (Wynne-Davies ed., *The Tales of The Clerk and The Wife of Bath* 127). What readers do not expect is that she seems to be proud of all these flaws and flaunts them as she likes, but perhaps that is only Chaucer making her more comical.

Alisoun seems reasonably satisfied in her first three marriages, for she was always well provided for. When it comes to the fourth one there is not much description but she seems to have been hurt when her husband's affairs are revealed. She does not marry for love until her fifth and last husband. Her first three marriages were simple enough in her mind and she describes them as effortless and easy. She shows no emotions towards her husbands except harsh and cruel ones, such as humiliation and ridicule. Her husbands were all old and rich and she with her youth and beauty has complete control over them. As she explains:

As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke  
How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!  
And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.  
They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;  
Me neded nat do lenger diligence  
To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence.

They loved me so wel, by God above,  
That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!  
(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 107).

So help me God, I have to laugh outright  
Remembering how I made them work at night!  
And faith I set no store by it; no pleasure  
It was to me. They'd given me their treasure,  
And so I had no need of diligence  
Winning their love, or showing reverence.  
They loved me well enough, so, heavens above,  
Why should I make a dainty of their love?  
(Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 264).

They have already given her everything without her having to work for it, so they become boring and unattractive to her. It is as the Wife of Bath only wants what she cannot have, for when she has it; it will become stale and uninteresting in her eyes, and this she admits to later.

When it came to the forth spouse, things change for the worse for her. He actually does what she had accused her first three husbands of doing; he keeps a mistress and cheats on her. Her feelings towards her fourth husband are not fully shown, except that she is angry at him for keeping a concubine:

“And I was yong and ful of ragerye,  
Stibourn and strong, and joly as a pye” (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 111).

When his funeral is held Alisoun pretends to be grieving when in fact she is busy eying her fifth victim, a “clerk” named Jankyn, who is much younger than she is. He has



worked at her house for some time, and it is suggested that they have already had an affair. Jankyn is the only one she loves of her five husbands. The reason for her love for him, she says, is that women always want what they cannot have, and since he is disdainful, she craves him even more. This she says makes her want him, and for the same reason it is why she loses interest in her first three husbands (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 112).

Jankyn treats Alisoun very badly by beating her and constantly undermining her. His favourite activity in degrading her is by quoting from a book he called *Theophrastus and Valerius*. It is a misogynistic manuscript which is about how women are the downfall of all men throughout history, beginning with the greatest sinner, Eve. He then goes on to the legends of Samson and Hercules and how they are betrayed by women. Finally he reads a long passage about many treacherous and evil women and their deceitfulness towards the men in their lives. After a long period of constantly hearing these passages repeated, she tears a few pages from the book which makes him give her a big blow on the ear, resulting in her deafness. Following these events things turn around in their marriage; Jankyn regrets the stroke and becomes submissive to her (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 114-115).

Alisoun then gains what she had always wanted, sovereignty over her man and also his love. This is perhaps the only moment when she is truly happy in her lifetime. Here the Wife's clear evidence of the benefits of a wife's sovereignty is shown. When she let him control her, he scolded her and hit her, but when she gains the power, she says they were both at their happiest. Jankyn, however, proves himself useful in a surprising way with his chauvinistic book (later called Jankyn's *Book of Wikked Wives*), in spite of his first intentions to do the opposite. He in fact teaches his wife and provides her with knowledge she did not have before. As Alastair Minnis says in his book *Fallible Authors*:

– but thanks to Jankyn, she is in possession of more élite and powerful knowledge.

Needless to say, Jankyn did not put on a course of Bible-study for his wife. But when

his misogynistic *auctores* quoted Scripture to suit themselves, she inevitably was exposed to the procedures of biblical hermeneutics” (Minnis 248).

After Jankyn unknowingly teaches his wife, she attacks some of the major misogynists of her age who had spent their lives criticizing women. Alisoun would not have been able to do this without the facts presented by Jankyn. “...her clerical husband Jankyn – not to mention those frequent visits to Mass – has taught her well those methods of exegesis she decries, both patristic and mythographic...” (Chance 215). She of course changes his information to her advantage, but she argues and justifies the many sinners of the female race in her Prologue.

The Wife of Bath in fact tells her fellow pilgrims two stories. She starts with the story of her life in her Prologue, focusing mainly on her multiple marriages, and then she tells her actual Tale of romance. The Tale can be read as a sort of extension of the Prologue, for although Alisoun presents it as a Breton lai, she is still trying to reach and convince the male audience of the goodness of matrimony for her own benefit.

Marriage is what Alisoun is all about. In her life’s description she spends most of her time talking about her own, and having already been married five times, there was much to tell. She has outlived all of her husbands and is now a widow of considerable wealth. Her independent lifestyle would hint that she is happy with her status as it is at the time of the pilgrimage. However, this successful and aggressive lady also feels the need to love and be loved in return. Being at the age of 40, she was already considered old during the Middle Ages, when life expectancy was much shorter, and this brings less time for her to find companion number six. Fear of ending up alone is catching up with her, and that drives her into using her both her Prologue and Tale as a way of pursuing a future spouse. Therefore, she continues her search for her next husband and uses her experience in her favour.

One thing she has above many other of her fellow females is experience, and this she sees as a quality:

Experience, though noon auctoritee  
Were in this world, were right ynogh to me  
(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 105).

‘If there were no authority on earth  
Except experience, mine, for what it’s worth,  
And that’s enough for me (Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 258).

By this she claims to have the right to preach to anyone about whether or not they should spend their lifetime being married or not. She puts herself in the judgement seat on this subject and claims to know all about it. Alisoun does not only lecture her companions about the qualities of marriage, but also some of the woes she had gone through. “... the Wife knows the real, the whole truth about the woes of marriage as they really are, because she knows that these woes are not inflicted upon women, but that women inflict them upon their husbands” (Huppé 107). In the end, however, she claims and therefore justifies herself, that any woe can be worked out, at least by her:

“Diverse schools maken parfyt clerkes  
And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes” (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 208).

In other words, with her experience and practise she can make any marriage perfect.

Alisoun behaves like a lecturer in schoolroom, and the subject she is teaching is marriage. “In this school she teaches from experience, rather than from authority, of woe in marriage and of the nonsense produced by the figurative methods of the (male) glossator in relation to biblical texts...” (Chance 214). She states that it has bothered none of her latest four husbands that she was no longer a virgin, but they rather enjoyed that she has skills and knowledge in bed.

With that view in mind, she begins to convince her audience how experience is better than virginity. In some ways it can be seen as if she was taking sides with Eve the sinner against the Virgin Mary, the saint. This is a difficult subject to be against, since virginity was considered to be holy. Although some may be surprised, Alisoun uses the Bible to support her argument of experiences with men and marriages and uses it furthermore to prove her point in opposition to the holiness of the virginity:

For hadde God commanded maydenhede,  
Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede.  
And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,  
Virginitee, thane wherof sholde it growe?  
(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 106).

Had God commended maidenhood to all  
Marriage would be condemned beyond recall,  
And certainly if see were never sownm  
How ever could virginity be grown?  
(Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 260).

The Wife of Bath reads the Bible in her own self-serving way and does the same when listening to Jankyn's readings of his book. She turns the passages she chooses into feminist ones. For her to belittle virginity is the same as to belittle the Virgin Mary, the holiest of all women. Chaucer is perhaps with this letting his readers see how much Alisoun thinks of herself and that she has no problem in claiming to be of more value than the Virgin Mary. This is perhaps just a cover for her insecurity and her newly found fear of ending up alone, but still it takes something extra to think of one self as higher than the Virgin Mary. Chauncey

Wood describes Chaucer's attitude towards this subject in her chapter in "Three Chaucerian Widows: Tales of Innocence and Experience":

The Wife's desire to have "gouvernaunce" and "maistrie" in marriage prompts us to ask who has governance and mastery in the world. For Chaucer, it is the Virgin herself, "mayde and mooder" (the Wife, remember is neither) who is "gouvernouresse" of heaven and "maistresse" of all the earth (Wood 287).

Chaucer is in a way trying to make his readers see that Alisoun is actually jealous of the mother of Christ, for she is in control, both in heaven and on earth. The Virgin Mary is in other words the ultimate governess and has what the Wife of Bath wants.

Alisoun continues give reasons for her many marriages, as well as continuing to compare herself with persons from the Bible. For example, she puts her multiple marriages into a perspective by saying that holy men, such as Abraham, Jacob and Solomon were all supposed to have had their fair share of wives in their days (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 105). With these comparisons it can be seen again that she has a high opinion of herself, for many would not dare to try to measure up in any way to these men. Her example can be seen as rational however, for they all had more than one wife, were thought of as great men and were not in any way judged for their polygamy. But with this she also simply ignores the fact that they were men and she is a woman.

The real inner struggle for the Wife to deal with was that she wants it all when it comes to marriage; that is she expects to have the unconditional love of her husband, but also to have the control over him. These statements of hers can be interpreted as an undesirable matter for a male audience, for the norm was that the wife should obey her husband in every respect. In a way she is going against her own intentions, without perhaps realising it. She also describes how her future husband is going to pay all her debts and simply be her slave (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 107). By describing so vividly how her treatment of her

future husband is going to be, she cannot be winning any favours from the male side of the company. Because of her independence and her pride, she is revealing too much of her wants.

One of the Wife's companions on the Pilgrimage, a man with little or no morals, the Pardoner, says that she can truly preach about the concept of love and marriage. He, however, states that he is himself engaged at the moment, but her narrative has made him change his mind about marriage. He claims that perhaps he will not go through with his engagement after hearing of her former management of her previous marriages. He goes on a little later to ask her to continue to share her wisdom (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 107). The reason for him wanting her to continue is not revealed but he may want a further proof of not going into marriage or maybe he was looking for a reason to carry on with his engagement. For the Pardoner to consider breaking up his engagement after hearing Alisoun's ideas on marriage is awful for her, for she was trying to gain a husband, not make them turn away from the idea of marriage.

Although it would have been better for the Wife of Bath to hide her flaws and some of her experience with men she is not willing to do so. She is not trying to make her life seem like a fairytale, she is just telling it as it is. "Her desire ... is to tell the truth, without "gloss" – adornment, dressing up, interpretation – as if her use of the male concept of "fantasy" needed to be redressed with an honest female equivalent" (Chance 216). Men did not want a wife who had sovereignty over them, they wanted a servant most of all. Women were the inferior sex; that was the standard thinking at the time, so for the Wife of Bath to ask for power within a marriage would have been thought of as ludicrous.

The picture we get so far of the wife is not a pretty one, but she does have some qualities that would make her a desirable wife. Being unhappy when alone and always on the lookout for husband material number six, one can relate to her state of loneliness and feel compassion and sympathy towards her. One must not forget that underneath this rough

exterior and all of her self-flattering is still a woman who craves love. It can be said that Alisoun puts on a protective shield so that her vulnerability cannot be attacked. This is smart to some extent for she will not make an easy target with her attitude, but she could also be seen as less feminine because of it. By showing her independence, her feisty attitude and success in both married life as in business, she comes off as a strong character but perhaps also a little repulsive. She wants to be accepted by both males and females, but that was not an easy thing to do in the medieval times. Bouwe Postmus displays this view of hers in his chapter “The Woe That Is in Marriage”:

Her feelings are ambivalent, because her desire to enter the men’s world and to share their sense of belonging and contentment is vying with a proud conviction of her “otherness”, which makes her entry into the world of the men impossible, as it involves the betrayal and sacrifice of the very feminine qualities that she is clinging to (Postmus 107).

The Wife of Bath is her own master in the area of business and describes herself as a woman of trade. Although some may disagree, Alisoun is a role model for other women, at least in the terms of operating a business. Her handiwork and skills make her a very desirable wife, and with that, she can be thought of as a respectable example for other women. She is a business woman who is so extremely good with her hands that she is widely known for her craftsmanship of textile. She has earned respect and a name for herself rightfully and Chaucer even says of her skill in the General Prologue:

Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt  
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt  
(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 30).

In making cloth she showed so great a bent

She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent

(Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 15).

To be considered to surpass the textile businesses in Ypres and Gaunt is a rare compliment, for those places were the capitals of Europe's textile business at the time.

Alisoun also thinks of herself as a pious person and attends church regularly in her parish. She gives to charity and is dutiful, however, she has her opinions on how things should be in her church. She thinks more highly of herself than other churchgoers and becomes infuriated if someone dares in front of her inside the church, for she has to be first; otherwise she will not give to charity that day. This is a really obnoxious side of her and again, a good example of her self-centredness.

Alisoun is also different from most women of her time for she has done a fair share of travelling. While the majority of medieval woman usually didn't see more than their hometowns for the whole course of their lives, she has already been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and also to Rome and Boulogne (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 31).

A common misunderstanding for the readers of Chaucer is to think that Alisoun is a complex character. She is shallow and self-absorbed, smart in some sense, but often enough her intellect is put to use only for her benefit alone.

The Tale of Alisoun's is a tale of romance and dominance with elements of magic. The beginning of Alisoun's Tale would not suggest a romance or a fairy tale as it is supposed to be. It begins with a knight in King Arthur's court who rapes a young girl. He is then convicted and sentenced to death. However Queen Guinevere steps in and demands that his fate be put in her hands and sets out a quest for him to perform. By this Alisoun is changing the roles of the sexes as she does in her marriages.

The knight, a highborn noble man, is completely in the power of a woman. This is very degrading for a man, even if it is the queen who has the choice. His life also depends on



the answers of women, for the only thing he has to do is to find an answer to one question in one year's time, or he will meet his doom. The Wife of Bath has rendered the knight utterly powerless and is using her tale to satisfy her longings of putting him under women's rule. Although this may seem as an easy task, the question is a tricky one; he is supposed to find the answer to what every woman most desires. The reason for Guinevere's interference is perhaps to send him on a mission that would seem impossible, for she knows her own sex. Her meddling in the case can also seem to be done for women everywhere, since he has wronged their sex by raping one of them. To get his answer, the knight rides out on his quest into the country, and asking every woman on his way, he gets many different answers. He has almost given up hope when he happens to come across a very unattractive old woman. She says that she has his answer, but in exchange for it, she makes him promise to fulfil one wish of hers. When presented to Queen Guinevere, the knight says that women desire governance over their husbands the most. This answer is accepted, and with that the old woman steps in and asks for the knight's hand which he reluctantly has to give her. On their wedding night, he refuses to sleep with her because of her ugly looks and low status. His shallowness is the only thing standing in the way of a happy marriage. She then begins to justify herself by quoting Dante, saying that one shapes one's own fortune and should not live on the ancient glory of one's ancestors. She says that there is no gentility or nobility of classes, and that it can only come directly from God. She then ends her speech by saying that he has a choice; she can either be young and beautiful, and he would by that take the chance of her not being faithful, or she could stay as she is, and he will never have to doubt her loyalty. This is a new approach on how to see women, for it had been the common thought that beautiful women must be in possession of all that is good while the ugly ones were bad and mischievous. She describes the qualities of inner beauty and asks the knight to choose. After this lecture, the knight proves that he has learnt his lesson and asks his wife to choose for herself. The old woman,

seeing the change in her knight, turns into a beautiful and faithful young lady, and they live happily ever after. The lesson to be learnt here is that knight redeems himself, not because of his wife's looks, but because of her wits and wisdom.

Here Alisoun uses her position as a storyteller to persuade her companions to agree with her that inner beauty is more important than the outer one. This is an old tale that Alisoun has changed to her advantage, and according to Judith Slover; the Wife has become the master of someone else's words. She does not misinterpret the text as many would believe, but rather takes her own experience and fuses it with the original. She knows what she "should" not include in her retelling of the tale according to misogynist views, but she ignores that (Slover 251). Another proof of her misogyny comes up at the beginning of her tale when the knight is getting all kinds of different answers from the women he meets on the way. As Katherine M. Rogers puts it:

"In the course of the tale, Chaucer lists all the things that women particularly value – riches, prestige, fun, expensive clothes, sexual pleasure, repeated marriages and flattery, especially if underserved. Love and virtue and anything women ought to desire are conspicuously absent" (Rogers 82).

By this, Alisoun is in a way degrading her fellow women, not caring at all what the general view of them would be after her tale. Her perspective of is not helping the elevation of the female sex and would suggest that the story is told by a misogynist. Alisoun is not trying to degrade women on purpose, she just doesn't care. She is thinking of herself and not paying much attention to the hurtful comments made about her sex. It is as if she is blinded by her own selfishness. One can see her self-centredness shine through the text by looking at the terrible act of rape at the tale's beginning:

He saugh a mayde walkyng hym biforn,  
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,

By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed;

(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 117).

He saw a maiden walking all forlorn

Ahead of him, alone as she was born.

And of that maiden, spite of all she said,

By very force he took her maidenhead

(Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 282).

She describes this incident as something that does not really seem that important nor have much effect, almost as if it was a part of an everyday routine, for that was how she feels about it. She does not take the act seriously, because she can't gain anything from it herself. It is curious how much violence is both in Alisoun's Prologue and Tale. Perhaps she does not take much notice of the rape of the young maiden, for she has already suffered her share of violence, both as the attacker and the victim. Alisoun says she can handle much more than other women. Marilyn Desmond says that perhaps virgins and inexperienced women cannot even handle being on the pilgrimage, they are better off safe and sound at home, far away from the dangers and the temptations that the Wife describes in her Prologue. Desmond also says that as an old widow the Wife with all her experience and knowledge can be a threat to other women (Desmond 131). As mentioned above, she scolded her first three husbands and used verbal violence against them. When it came to her fifth, Jankyn, there was actual physical violence involved from both sides, so she is no beginner when it comes to hostility.

The Tale is a tale of Alisoun's own wishes. Although she needs the answer of the old woman; dominance in marriage, she desires beautiful looks even more. That is the real key to getting a husband (according to Alisoun), and when the husband has been won over; she can carry out her wishes of sovereignty and literally try to break him in. She wants to be young

and beautiful again and perhaps wants an upper-class husband like the old hag. The old woman in the tale reflects the Wife of Bath herself in some ways, and sometimes, it is as if the Wife is using the old hag to represent her own views. By stressing how ugly the old woman really is, the Wife of Bath is showing her own fear of aging. She makes her heroine as hideous as possible and with that she is trying to show the company that everybody, no matter how repulsive they are, can be capable of finding love and be loved in return. She does not think that she is as hideous as the old hag, but if the hag can make a worthy wife, being as ugly as she described her, then Alisoun herself would make an excellent one.

The Wife's Tale is not told for the greater good, but only for the benefit of the Wife. With her Tale Alisoun is reflecting her innermost desires, to be accepted for her personal qualities, not her beauty; the only reason, however, for her trying to stress this is because she is herself losing her looks. The knight in her tale is also a picture perfect man according to Alisoun; he is young and of a highborn class. He has a violent side about him which makes him perhaps masculine in her eyes, and she seems to be strangely attracted to cruel men; the best example being Jankyn. He also doesn't know too much about women so somebody will have to teach him about the ways of life, and the Wife of Bath would have been happy to do so. The old woman in the fable has a secret, for she magically changes from a beautiful lady to an ugly creature before the tale of the Wife begins. Therefore, it can be seen as a sort of a female version of the "The Frog Prince", where a princess overcomes the hideousness of a frog and kisses him, making him turn into a beautiful prince. When the hag is sure of her knight's loyalty, she changes back: "... the hag *chooses* to be transformed because she has got what she wanted, a knight who grants her sovereignty" (Pearsall 90). With this the Wife is perhaps showing her audience that if men will subdue to her power, she will be kind to them.

It can be said that Alisoun even envies her own character; for while being as ugly as she is, the old hag still manages to win the heart of her knight and doing so with her words

and wits and not her looks. As a result she receives what Alisoun desires. It also comes as a surprise how delightfully charismatic the old hag really is, and how first impressions can be misleading. Sigmund Eisner describes the old hag as follows:

She is the most sophisticated loathly lady of all, winning us to her inner charms long before we are aware of her concealed beauty. Her arguments do not limit themselves to the tiny sphere of the irreverent fabliau but expand to anxiety over issues common to mankind (Eisner 61).

The hag is therefore different, and in some ways better than Alisoun, for the hag quotes Dante correctly and does this not only for her own benefit. She does this also in order to try and teach her beloved knight better values, and make him focus beyond class distinctions and heritage. The Wife of Bath should then perhaps have taken the old hag as an example, but she chooses to turn a blind eye to this matter, and only focuses on the part where an ugly woman gets her noble man at the end.

Again to show Alisoun's selfishness in her act, she doesn't mind getting husbands on her looks alone when she had them, but now she has to play a different card. She is getting desperate and although she is proud of herself, she has self-deception concerning her looks. As she describes her outer appearance in her Prologue, one can see that she is terribly miserable:

That I have had my world as in my tyme.  
But age, allas that al wole envenyme,  
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith,  
Lat go. Farewel! The devel go therwith!  
The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle;  
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle;  
(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 111).

I've had my world and time, I've had my fling!

But age that comes to poison everything

Has taken all my beauty and my pith.

Well, let it go, the devil go therewith!

The flour is gone, there is no more to say,

And I must sell the bran as best I may;

(Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 271).

She is in other words saying her looks are gone, and now she has to make the most of what is left. Alluring men using only the power of words and wits is not something the Wife of Bath is used to. It would be no wonder then, if she would be unsuccessful in her quest at the end.

The Wife is not trying to educate men about being kinder to women, as one would perhaps think at first, when reading her tale. She is only thinking of herself and how she can use her story for her own personal gain. To cover up her selfish purposes, she stresses the effects of love; that a true lover doesn't let bad looks stand in his way of pursuing real love when it comes his way. In her defence Katherine M. Rogers points out in her book *The Troublesome Helpmate* that: "Chaucer raises an interesting possibility at the end of her prologue: after getting the mastery, she was kind and true to her husband all his life" (Rogers 82). This view is fascinating for it emphasizes the similarity with the old hag and Alisoun. This is perhaps the most curious thing about Alisoun; does she really gain mastery over her husbands, and does the old hag really have control over her knight?

There is a contradiction between Alisoun's theory and practise, and this view can be seen when her heroine doesn't follow her sovereignty at the end of the tale:

And she obeyed hym in every thing

That myghte doon hym hym pleasance or liking

(Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 121).

And she responded in the fullest measure

With all that could delight or give him pleasure

(Coghill, *Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 292).

This contradiction is very debatable; perhaps the easiest way to explain it is that the wife intended for her heroine, as well as she meant for herself, to be kind to her husband once he had given in to the Wife's power. The Wife of Bath is not an evil person, although some might have started seeing her in that light after hearing her constantly talking about mastery and her obsession with having control. She may have wanted the upper-hand in marriage, but she is also willing to be kind, if there is love between her and her husband.

To feel compassion for Alisoun is not so easy after hearing all the gruesome things she has done in her past, but one must be put into her shoes to see her side. To be a forty-something year old woman in Chaucer's time was not a sought after condition. Women who had reached that age were often enough thought of as at the end of the line (life expectancy was much shorter back then). She seems to need a husband to make her life worth living, pointing to the conclusion that she is a really lonely person. For the Wife to be in this difficult situation; to have outlived five husbands and be left alone is not an easy thought in her mind. One would think of abandonment, for she is always standing alone no matter how many husbands she marries. Alisoun must have thought in all her marriages that they would last, especially to Jankyn who is twice her junior in years (Jankyn's cause of death is never revealed in the Wife's Prologue).

The fact that she never gives up and is still going strong in her search for number six is an admirable quality, and it shows strength and courage. The yearning for love and security brings with it a sense of fear, which will only be soothed by the words "I do" from a man at

the altar. Why she is not happy with her situation as it was no one knows, but one would think that she is just a lonesome soul who wants a companion more than anything. Humans are by nature meant to mate, so her feelings are not anything peculiar. She is just another person seeking a partner to share her happiness and sorrows.

It cannot be denied that her intentions are selfish and in some ways cruel, wanting complete sovereignty, but perhaps most of it are just words to show that she is a strong character. That is an aspect of her that should be accepted, she sees that she belongs to an inferior race, that is women, but instead of letting that hold her back, she fights for her rights and demands respect from everyone, whether they are high or low, men or women. If she had been fighting for all females, this would be seen as extraordinary, but as usual she is only looking out for herself.

Alisoun, who has always relied on her good looks in snatching a good husband, is now facing the fact that her looks are going. This makes her nervous and more and more desperate, since she is constantly on the lookout for a new husband. Her real fear is made up of various obsessions combined; her looks, her lack of dominance, a craving for true love and perhaps the most decisive one, the fear of ending up alone. If she fails in her search for the next husband, she will be able to manage well enough with her possessions and lands from previous marriages. She will also be perfectly capable of providing and taking care of herself, but she will also lose a lot of comforts.

With a husband she is secure, she has someone to love her and someone she can boss around, marriage to a good husband also brings with itself good connections which will be very helpful for his business life. For as soon as women were married in the Middle Ages they lost their identities, no matter how hard they might have worked or how much possessions they owned, everything went to the husband's name. People are meant to mate, and it is in their nature to find a significant other to share and spend their life with. Alisoun's fear of



losing the ability to get men can be classified as rational. Humans often enough judge a book by its cover and tend to look quickly the other way if the outer presence of others is not to their liking. She therefore makes up her mind to seduce the male companions on the pilgrimage by trying to encourage their ability to see inside a woman; that is to look beyond her looks, if the males are capable of it.

Alisoun's obsession with staying young and beautiful is nothing new in the world; these were very desirable qualities and still are. For thousands of years myths and legends have contained sources of the gift of eternal youth and many people sought after this gift. This gift was supposed to be very magical, linking it to the elements in Alisoun's fable. There were many versions of the legend of eternal youth; the best known being the fountain of youth, and the elixir of life. These myths have survived throughout the ages, and still today this mania continues with multiple plastic surgeries and endless beauty contests, even for children. People have always been fixated on their looks, and the Wife of Bath is no exception. She exploits her looks while she has them and with old age she uses all the chances she gets to reach men; but unfortunately this also brings her desperation for a man to the surface.

Desperation has never been a desired quality, and often enough it pushes people away instead of drawing them in. The Wife cannot help it though, for she is really afraid to end up alone, and that fear is bringing out a very undesirable picture of her. Some would say that Alisoun is too concerned about her looks, but the fact is that a sexual attraction was and still is a very desirable quality. Without it women in Alisoun's time did not have much to offer men. Alistair Minnis says that age for men during the Middle Ages was a temporary hindrance; they only became more respectable with age. With women it was very different; their sex was an everlasting obstacle. With old age they become withered and since women were sometimes only judged by their looks, they were at times simply looked upon as expired products (Minnis 246). Alisoun's fear of losing her seductiveness is therefore rational. If a woman

during medieval times did not have good looks, she was not likely to have anything else to offer.

As previously mentioned, she was gap-toothed and therefore thought to be promiscuous and very sexually active. Alisoun does not prove this wrong, she rather does the opposite. For a woman during the medieval times, she is very liberal in her discussion about sexual intercourse. She even names her genitals, calls it her “bele chose”, and often enough in her Prologue she mentions how her husbands had craved it, and how she was willing or unwilling to give them sexual favours. She declares that she uses sex as a weapon; that is she is only willing to give it when she is in want of something. One could also see this as a way of fear, not giving too much of what they are seeking always keeps them wanting more. She is different when it comes to Jankyn, for as she herself declares him to be: “But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay” (Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 112). She loves this man so that she is willing to give him her “bele chose” whenever he requests it, even after crushing her spirits as well as beating her.

What is striking about the Wife of Bath is that despite her fear of never getting another husband, she is not willing to hide her flaws. She does not seem to be afraid that the other pilgrims know how she treated her former husbands and also that her intentions with the sixth one are just the same. Humans often enough try to hide their imperfections to make themselves more attractive in the eyes of their desired. Marriage is supposed to be based on equality nowadays, but for the Wife of Bath and her fellow females during the Middle Ages, their purpose in marriage was to obey and serve their husbands. Men usually had the upper hand in marriage at that time and it was only in rare cases, like Alisoun’s first three marriages, that tables were turned. For a woman to have control over her husband was uncommon, but Alisoun, who is dominant by nature sees no problem with this. She scolds them, denies them sex unless she has something to gain from it, and accuses them of crimes they have not

committed. This is not a hard task for Alisoun, for she is not remotely in love with any of her first three husbands and treats them in any way she wants.

The Wife is working against herself with her declarations of bad treatment towards her husbands, for if she wants another husband, she would be better off lying about her past behaviour. This could be because she is proud of herself and all her actions, however, this could simply mean stupidity; that is she does not know when to stop. A woman with Alisoun's experiences with men should have known better than to have been almost eager to put her flaws on display. This is a contradiction to her fear of aging, and she has to be doing this unintentionally. She is very talkative, as can be seen by the length of her Prologue, so she seems to have a problem with boundaries and not know when enough is enough. This is a result of fear for many people, when uncertainty and insecurity strike, some tend to ramble on, telling the people around them too much information about themselves.

Alisoun's story would perhaps have fooled some simple listeners, but in general she must have failed. She does not believe her own words, and makes the mistake of telling her life story before she tries her moral tale on her companions. It can be said that she scares men away rather than drawing them in. With her prolonged speech about her experience, her audience realizes that she knows everything there is to know about the concepts love and marriage. Her theory that a man should bow to his wife would not make the most popular subject. By describing all the horrible actions she has committed towards her husbands, not to mention her mania about having both the love of a man and also complete sovereignty over him, would not have sounded appealing to most male ears at the time. Alisoun is therefore, sadly for her, driving men away from her.

The Wife offers her listeners two examples of how men would lead a happier life, if they surrendered their power to their wives. The first example is Jankyn and the second one the knight. By the end of both her narratives they had yielded to their wives and the

consequences are blissful marriages. Although she flatters herself with all her good qualities as a woman of trade, independent and strong, her flaws unfortunately outweigh her good features. Her qualities would have been seen as negative at the time, especially her passionate opinions on sexual politics, which are in complete contradiction to the norm. When all is said and done, the Wife of Bath is not a very amiable person. However, it can be said that she deserves respect for her dedication towards her dreams, and her tenacity in achieving her goals. Her prologue ruins her story's intentions by revealing too much of her former life. Few men, or none at all, would want a woman who controlled them. She wants the best of both worlds, and that is often enough not possible.

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