**Allas! Allas! That evere love was synne! Debates about The Wife of Bath**

**Nigel Wheale considers the character of Alisoun in The Canterbury Tales and explores why she is one of the most prominent and controversial characters in all his tales.**

Alisoun, the Wife from Bath, gave Geoffrey Chaucer a very hard time. Comparison of surviving manuscripts of The Canterbury Tales (there are fifty-five slightly differing versions) demonstrates that this particular pilgrim and her ‘Prologue’ and ‘Tale’ were probably developed over a lengthy period, and subject to a good deal of revision; the Wife’s ‘Prologue’ is arguably the most revised text in the entire collection. Poems such as The Canterbury Tales were intended for reading aloud to late fourteenth-century audiences as entertainment, but also as lively, controversial pretexts that would provoke ‘debaat’. As Harry Bailly, Host of the Tabard Inn might say, ‘What think yow?’

**Engaging the Reader**

Chaucer seems to have worked very hard to make Alisoun of Bath one of the most complicated and contentious individuals on the entire pilgrimage. As well as being entertainment for audiences, the popularity of The Canterbury Tales ensured that the work became a text for more private reading, as the number of surviving manuscript (and early printed) copies indicates. We can see from these that the Wife of Bath enraged her readers more than any other pilgrim, thanks to the large number of marginal comments and responses provoked by her ‘Prologue’ and ‘Tale’. For example, when the Knight of her story seeks ‘To lerne what thyng wommen loven moost’ (921), and is told

Somme seyde that oure hertes been moost esed Whan that we been yflatered and yplesed 929-30

an inflamed contemporary reader – presumably male – scribbled in the margin ‘VERUM EST’ – ‘It’s true’!

**A Sociological Portrait**

The Canterbury Tales are virtually a sociological study of late fourteenth-century English society, which was in recovery from the devastations of plague and the traumatic changes that followed pestilence. Established hierarchy and ‘degree’ had been disrupted by the catastrophic population losses of the mid-century, but as the economy recovered, individuals seized the opportunity to improve their status and accumulate wealth.

The blossoming of English poetry and prose in the fourteenth century is most easily intelligible as the reflection of a changing social structure and its changing ideals: a broadening of the middle range of society. Coleman

Alisoun is a characteristic member of this vigorous new economy: the second detail we learn about her from the ‘General Prologue’ is that in her trade of cloth-making, the predominant industry of medieval England, she excels amongst the finest European producers – though this may be another instance of her canny self-promotion. The Wife’s economic independence frees her from many of the restrictions of her society; in her ‘Prologue’ and ‘Tale’ we hear no more about her working life, but she brings a resolutely entrepreneurial approach to love, sexuality and marriage:

And therefore every man this tale I telle, Wynne whoso may, for al is to selle; With empty hand men may none haukes lure.          ‘Prologue’, 413-5

**Transcending Anti-Feminist Views**

Alisoun, one of the most vivid and memorable characters in all of English literature, is a complex construction, woven together from many sources by her creator

a textual creature, a tissue of anti-feminist discourses relating to sexually aggressive and shrewish women. Minnis

For readers now, the central questions about Alisoun are surely these: is the figure of the Wife of Bath able to transcend the ferociously anti-feminist assumptions of high medieval society? Could she have been read with genuine sympathy in her period, or even in our own, supposedly more enlightened times?

The arch-text of medieval European society, the Old and New Testaments, would appear to condemn Alisoun for her highly individual attitudes to her role as a wife. Read the description of ‘the good wife’ in the ‘Book of Proverbs’, chapter 31, verses 10 to 31, and you see that this female paragon is completely dedicated to her (single) husband, their household – and their children. Like Alisoun, she spins and weaves fine linen (and clothes herself attractively) but in sharp contrast to Alisoun,

Sche openyde hir mouth to wisdom; and the lawe of merci is in hir tunge. Verse 26, in the translation attributed to John Wyclif, Chaucer’s contemporary

Although Alisoun acknowledges the theological command that marriage is the means to ‘wexe and multiplye’ humankind (‘Prologue’, 28), she nowhere refers to children of her own; she asserts:

I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age In the actes and in fruyt of mariage 113-4

Has she been ‘fruitful’, as a mother? Or has she chosen to accumulate land and property as a calculating, serial monogamist?

**Experience or Auctoritee?**

Alisoun breaks so many rules: she takes more time over her ‘Prologue’ than any other pilgrim, and, again uniquely, her introduction is actually longer than the ‘Tale’ she tells. Her ‘Prologue’ can be read as a confessional form of mock sermon, and is one of the most heavily ‘glossed’ or commented upon passages in The Canterbury Tales. Alisoun is garrulous, her speech is prolix, seeking to overwhelm the authority of merely written words and text. She announces this subversive ‘topos’ or theme with her opening words:

Experience, though noon auctoritee Were in this world, is right ynough for me           ‘Prologue’, 1-2

Pragmatic knowledge gained from life itself is set against the inert power of text: we can all sense the challenging agenda that is so evidently implicit in this opposition – female ‘experience’ is opposed to male ‘learning’. Chaucer’s use of the word ‘experience’ here is an excellent example of the way that he incorporated new vocabulary into his writing, and as so often, taken directly from French. The Wife is also ‘experienced’ in the sense of being sexually informed, ‘she koude of that art the olde daunce’ (‘General Prologue’, 476). ‘Experience’ will also be invoked by Eve at the moment of the Fall in Milton’s Paradise Lost:

Experience, next to thee I owe,  Best guide Book 9: 807

so for both medieval and early modern society, ‘experience’ was a troubling, potentially destabilising concept.

**Religious Debates**

A number of critics have argued that Chaucer’s pilgrimage poem can be related to subversive, anti-clerical movements of the period, following the radical criticisms of church and state made by John Wyclif and the subsequent ‘Lollard’ movement. This is a contentious view, but it may be that the Wife of Bath also contributes to these ‘debaats’, which had begun to question the exclusion of laity and indeed women from the right to contribute to theological argument, and even to preach. The Friar certainly reacts in this way:

dame … lete auctoritees, on Goddes name To prechyng, and to scoles of clergye 1274-7

Alisoun’s prolix ‘Prologue’ is in this sense a woman’s attempt to appropriate the (male) power of the sermon itself.

**The Tale Itself**

When she finally gets around to recounting her ‘Tale’, it can at first sight appear to be a simple narrative of romantic wish fulfilment, exactly the kind of sentimental fluff that would appeal to (a certain conception) of the female audience. Alisoun’s ‘Tale’ is much more challenging than this: Chaucer added the initial, casually brutal rape to this version of the ‘Loathly Lady and the Converted Knight’ genre, adapted from several sources. He added tension to the climax of the ‘Tale’ by making the Knight grant ‘sovereynetee’ (1038) before the Lady’s transformation from ‘foul and old’ to ‘yong and fair’ (1220, 1223). Also unique to Chaucer’s version of the story is the ‘debaat’ over true ‘gentillesse’, and the forthright conclusion (from this most materialist of pilgrims!) that

Heere may ye se wel how that genterye Is nat annexed to possessioun, 1146-7

**Unconditional Love**

The Wife’s most shocking admission, in the view of conventional morality and behaviour, was a relatively late addition to the poem, according to textual scholarship:

I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun, But evere folwede myn appetit, Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit; I took no kep, so that he liked me, How poore he was, ne eek of what degree. ‘Prologue’, 622-6

Reading this passage, a truly startling comparison might occur to us. Who else can be said to offer love unconditionally, and without regard to appearance, fortune or status? Who was also criticised for socialising with the most disreputable people of his time? Who refused to condemn a woman who was accused of committing adultery (a parable found only in the Gospel of John 8: 1-11)? Dame Alisoun’s gospel of an unconditional, indiscriminate ‘charity of love’ may be read as a blasphemous perversion of the true Christian teaching, a promiscuity driven by the excesses of uncontrolled female desire, according to the anti-feminist tradition. This would be the conventional medieval reader response, as witnessed by the marginal comments of the time. Alternatively, for a medieval reader sensitive to ‘typology’ – the ways in which any text could find an echo or prefiguring in scripture – Alisoun might here be sharing a profound truth with the figure and teaching of Christ himself, even if in her own touchingly vulnerable and all too human fashion.

**Further Reading**

Coleman, J.: English Literature in History. 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers (1981)

McPhilemy, K.: ‘Chaucer – An Early Genre Critic?’, emagazine 37, Sept 2007

Minnis, A.J.: Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, (2008). Selections available in the ‘review’ format of Google Books.

Translation of the Bible attributed to John Wyclif and followers: http://wesley.nnu.edu/fileadmin/imported\_site/biblical\_studies/wycliffe/

Melvyn Bragg and scholars discuss John Wyclif: http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b011vh4k/In\_Our\_Time\_John\_Wyclif\_and\_the\_Lollards/