

ALISON THE MOST REBELLIOUS FEMININE CHARACTER IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

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ABSTRACT

The feminism movement that shook the world had one of the earliest reverberations in the character of Chaucer's the wife of Bath in The Canterbury Tales. Her oratory, learning and flair for debate still strike awe in our hearts. This character becomes even more important when she strips the clergy off their hypocrisy and exposes the age-old ossified prejudice against women in general. But it must not be overlooked that her arguments are targeted at her own purpose of carnal gratifications. Her burning body in the flame of lust thirsts for more and her confidence is fueled by her financial stability. However, Chaucer was certainly not the exclusive inventor of this immortal character

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INTRODUCTION

The Canterbury Tales is medieval period's one of the most enchanting literary works. The work is about pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. Among them there is somebody, a widow from the city of Bath. The prologue she presents is longer and more interesting than her tale. The prologue is more interesting because of Alison. The wife of Bath's argumentative nature and her most rebellious nature against the conventional ideas and teachings of scholars and philosophers who spoke to establish women's inferiority and disloyalty. All throughout the prologue she tries to affirm the rights and privileges of women in general. In this process she draws several examples from various sources, ancient, classical and Biblical. The fourteenth century was a time when England had not yet experienced any enlightenment in Science or any revival of Classical education. The Bible was one of the chief sources of man's guidance and learning. The gospels were a very important source of conduct. The wife of Bath is a widow and married for five times but now hungers for the sixth time. She knows that a society does not quite easily approve of multiple marriages of women though it is not uncommon even in the late medieval period. Christ once went to Cana where he met one unknown woman whom he advised upon marriage but Christ never uttered a word, disapproving multiple marriages. In fact, the holy Bible says, "Be fruitful and multiply". The wife refers in her prologue to biblical Lamech, Jacob and Abraham, all of whom had more than one marriage. Both Abraham and Jacob are two towers in Christianity. If many marriages are sin, then all these people are sinners. Even to breed more pious people one needs to procreate more. Even if women are counseled to marry just once, counsels are not commandments and therefore they are practically free to wed as many times as they wish.

The wife of Bath here by these arguments proves herself a well-read person in the Biblical scriptures. No one before her probably could see the holy pages as she has seen or interpreted them. This makes her quite distinctive in her time as very little number of women were literate at that time. It was only the prerogative of female folk of the nobility. A business woman like the wife as she has been portrayed by Chaucer is unique.

The remarkable argumentative quality of the woman is not just confined to books of faith but also to the use and abuse of human anatomy. She is of quite a strong opinion that human body is meant for certain acts to perform especially the private organs which should not be put to use only when it comes to any act of bodily purgation but the same instruments must be in operation to gratify one's sexual cravings. Here she justifies bodily connections between two individuals not necessarily within marriage but without too. Because her emphasis is more on the physical satisfaction than the sanctity of marriage. This part is really striking because no one before the wife could so emphatically stress the uninhibited use of human sexual organs.

Further the wife reiterates the importance of the physical relation between man and wife. She says, of course keeping her late young husband in mind that conjugal gratification is always important in married life. The husband, according to her is both a thrall and a debtor to her. Even husbands are also of several types. Many look for wealth; many for beauty and then many physical charms in a woman. Referring again to the ancient authors, the wife of Bath explains how men do not forget to examine different articles in market before choosing them for purchase be it utensils, furniture, clothes or the like but most unfortunately the same men do not try to weigh a woman or girl before they decide to marry and there lies the real trouble. Both a husband and a wife discover each other only after they have married each other. This type of examination is really eye opening especially when spoken from a widow of the fourteenth century.

The wife of Bath raises another very pertinent point which is ever relevant in a relation and that is mutual faith in each other. While the husband puts tabs upon her wife, she claims she can very easily fool him by wearing some disguise.

The medieval people had a deep belief in astronomy and they really believed life could be regulated by planetary positions. The wife of Bath here again shows her remarkable insight in astrology and uses her knowledge in her favour. Even by astronomy she proves that there is something profoundly different between man and woman.

The wife of Bath has always been credited with a feminist voice. She championed the rights of women in the fourteenth century and therefore had to fight those age-old ideas of society which were indoctrinated by male thinkers and philosophers. Since the Classical times many such examples were put forward which claimed a superiority of men over women.

The wife of Bath has fought the conventional misogynistic ideas of the medieval times. Chaucer's sources of the character lie in *Romance of the Rose*, *The Golden book on marriage* by Theophrastus, *Against Jovinian* by St Jerome; *The letter of Valerius to Ruffinus* by Walter Map and *The Bible*. The fourteenth century England was much changed from Teutonic England and many changes were slowly creeping into the country. Women were in many cases financially independent. Many of them were employed in cloth trade. Many widows were well off with the fortunes that their late husbands had left for them; many widows decided to settle down by marrying younger men. There are instances of aristocratic women going on pilgrimages. The wife of Bath clearly exemplifies one.

The wife has been married five times and, on each occasion, she had some serious considerations and priorities for her choosing. On the first three occasions money was on her mind. She says three husbands could hardly satisfy her in bed but they were understanding and cooperative but the last two husbands were relatively younger and physically much more capable. The last husband was twenty years younger than herself. The wife's most tactful and outspoken disposition made her absolutely firm on her decisions. She knew what she needed and she does not have any inhibition what so ever to talk about her sexual emancipation. The wife of Bath also exemplifies certain women adulterous characters of the late medieval period. Adultery was no way uncommon in either sex. But all such confessions of this most modern and outspoken character have been put by Chaucer against the backdrop of the above mentioned classical and medieval authors who had no qualms what so ever to speak continuously against women's unreliability and their supposed unworthiness. The wife of Bath goes on refuting them one by one in a most sardonic way, keeping her position absolutely stout and strong. The wife knew what her fourth husband was reading alone. It was most disgusting book that denigrates women in general. As a consequence, both husband and wife had a brawl. Alison was hit in her ear by him causing some sort of deafness. Alison also tore one page from his book.

The wife of Bath whose primary sources were classical and medieval authors who were out and about misogynistic have been humored by her. She in her prologue, using her most sharp argumentative faculty has refuted these old writers but only sarcastically and at the same time asserted rights of women, paving a path for more modern women to follow. The wife represents a tiny number of new breed of women who started taking an active role in financial affairs. She is a merchant who goes on pilgrimages occasionally. She also has this propensity to flaunt her dress and her jewellery to men folk and she does not seem to have any inhibitions to talk freely about her marriages and affairs. This however can be interpreted as a sign of lack of breeding on her part. But actually, this is a way of flaunting her newly found financial freedom in a whole range of feminine rights.

The wife does not mention anything of her own children. Because most likely she does not have any. In the medieval period when women had long stints of child bearing phases Alison does not have any despite this fact that she was married at twelve. But even childlessness is no cause for worry to her. Alison has also proved that her non fidelity or non virgin status has not troubled her past husbands. She considers herself quite attractive even to younger men. She loves costly and uncommon dresses which she keeps wearing quite regularly.

There is no doubt that this fourteenth century character is unique in literature. her many accomplishments including her argumentative bend of mind, her wit, her most rebellious mental disposition, her being well versed in ancient and medieval literatures have drawn many readers to the Canterbury tales.

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