

Passion and virtue in  
'the wife of bath's  
prologue and tale'  
and 'the rivals'



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In both Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' and Sheridan's 'The Rivals', the question of morality is not a straightforward one, as there is tension surrounding the purpose of marriage and traditional social expectations. However, Chaucer's exploration of passion and whether lust and virtue can co-exist is far more controversial than that of Sheridan, who in a true Georgian fashion, only lightly challenges contemporary attitudes towards morality. In both works, the sense of resolution is limited and slightly ambiguous as the audience is left uncertain as to whether the writers' promote virtue over passion or simply reject their protagonists' efforts due to the inevitability of masculine authority in social hierarchy.

In 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' Chaucer depicts Alisoun as a fiery temptress whose controversial perspective of marriage strongly challenges medieval attitudes towards virtue and godliness. This lascivious portrayal of Alisoun would have been deeply displeasing to a medieval audience who would have valued virtuous living and the avoidance of sin above all the elements in Christian teaching. Therefore, Chaucer's Alisoun would have been a thoroughly indecent figure, as arguably for a medieval audience, the co-existence of lust and Christian values would be impossible. Throughout the novel, Chaucer presents Alisoun as an immoral figure by contemporary standards as she not only chooses to reject the authority of the Church on marriage and instead uses this same authority to justify her own lustful nature. Her controversial stand-point of marriage is presented through Chaucer's exploration of the "wo that is in marriage," whereby the "wo" viewed by Alisoun differs to that of the clergy. For the Church, the "wo" in marriage is the act of sex which despite its function as a religious sacrament,

was perceived as a dirty act by the clergy which distances a person from God. Alisoun recognises that "virginitie" is a "parfit" state, however she chooses to revel in her promiscuity as she "nil envye no virginitie." However, Alisoun is not an adulterer, and so her immorality is not through the fact that she engages in sexual acts with her 'five housboundes' but that she has manipulated the authority of the Church to fulfil her sexual desires and remains conspicuously childless in the process, despite recognising that "God bad us to wexe and multiply." The irony of this claim clearly shows that Alisoun is indeed aware that she is unvirtuous as the only way she can justify promiscuity is by using the patriarchal system. Therefore, despite the fact that some feminist critics would label the Wife as an "anti-patriarchal hero" (Susan Gubar), she ironically reinforces negative medieval attitudes of the day.

Chaucer immediately highlights Alisoun's misconstrued perspective on the "wo that is in marriage," which suggests that the act of sex in marriage, although is frowned upon by the clergy, despite it being necessary for child-bearing. Whereas a more modern audience would be perhaps more tolerant of Alisoun's reasoning due to more liberal attitudes associated with free-love, Chaucer's presentation of her is far from virtuous in keeping with conservative attitudes of the day of it being immoral, as she remains conspicuously childless, despite her assured claim that "God bad us to wexe and multiply." Therefore, whereas for the clergy the "wo in marriage" is associated with immorality, for Alisoun it marks the complete opposite, the idea that she lacks maistree (power), and is subjected to the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society.

Whilst in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue', the Wife's views are labelled as immoral, In Sheridan's 'The Rivals', references to sex in marriage are far more implicit, as the characters labelled as immoral are those who pose some sort of challenge to the social expectations of the day. Lydia is the epitome of virginal purity at "love-breathing seventeen" as opposed the "gat-toothed" Alisoun, however her passion lies in seeking knowledge, as she languishes in her bedroom reading texts such as the "The Delicate Distress" and "The Innocent Adulterer," a thoroughly indecent French novel frowned upon by a Georgian audience. Here, passion is not necessarily associated with sex, however the stigma attached to the longing of female education in the play is viewed with the same distaste as Alisoun's promiscuity in the 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue'. Both writers' therefore elude that passion, whether it is physical, or in the form of female education, cannot coexist with virtue as virtue can only exist when there is social conformity. Sheridan presents this idea through the dialogue between the older generation in the play, Sir Anthony and Mrs Malaprop, who although are not exempt from Sheridan's criticism, fiercely believe that "learning does not become of a woman" and that a "circulating library" will cause Lydia to "long for the fruit" of the "" tree of diabolical knowledge." Sir Anthony's hot-headed attack on female education paired with references to the role of Eve in the Fall of Man in Genesis suggests that passion is sinful. Chaucer also refers to the Fall of Man in the Prologue when Alisoun speaks of "Eva's wikkednesse." Although these texts were written and published in different centuries, it is evident that religion always has and will continue to underpin society's general perception of passion and lust, largely associated with immorality.

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On the other hand, whilst Chaucer's depiction of Alisoun's reasoning is flawed, her values presented in the Prologue are to a certain extent, well-justified. In the Prologue, it is clear that despite Chaucer's portrayal of Alisoun through a medieval male lens which we would expect to condition his viewpoint of women as natural inferior to men, Chaucer appears to criticise the unjust nature of patriarchy. For example, Chaucer proposes the idea that wealth and social status does not necessarily equate to chivalric code of conduct or "gentillesse." The Knight in the Prologue uses his might to "raffe" the "maidenhed" (virginitie) of the girl by the river. Consequently Chaucer places the fate of the Knight in the hands of the Queen, thus reversing the idea of male maistree as "the queene, al at hir will" chose "wheither she wolde him save or spille.". Therefore, whilst Alisoun is largely the subject of criticism in the Prologue, Chaucer also highlights the immorality of men. It appears that although wealth and social status can be acquired through "linage" of a "gentil house," gentillesse is not "planted naturaleelly" as a truly "gentil" man is one who "dooth gentil dedis." Therefore, despite Alisoun's "immorality," it is clear that her attitudes towards chivalry are commendable. This idea is supported by feminist critics such as Jackie Shead have noted that "The quest and its outcome is a salutary lesson to males about not overriding women." Indeed, evidently Chaucer is not a feminist in the same way that a modern audience would perceive one to be, however he does invite the audience to question what it is to be moral or immoral by social standards and to a great degree, the line between is ambiguous.

Both Sheridan and Chaucer present females as flawed characters however alike to how Chaucer appears to admire Alisoun's rejection of medieval attitudes towards social-hierarchy, Sheridan also commends Lydia's efforts to seek independence. Both the Wife of Bath and Lydia arguably have admirable values despite being portrayed as immoral in their society. However, the dark reality of both texts is that their efforts to obtain change is largely futile as in *The Rivals* Lydia compromises her independence to live in "unalloyed happiness" with Jack and the Knight in the Prologue obtains a wife both "faire and goode" despite his crime. Therefore, both of the endings of these texts reinforce the inevitability of the unjust treatment of women in Patriarchal society. Chaucer makes this apparent through Alisoun's use of language which undermines her argument in the Prologue. Critic Elaine Treharne argues that in the Prologue, "Chaucer fundamentally accomplished the depiction of a woman who is undermined by her own prolixity and hyperbole, and who, furthermore, exhibits virtually all the elements of womens' stereotypical language." Evidence of Treharne's criticism is reflected by Chaucer's use of hyperbole and vernacular language paired with references with ecclesiastical connotations. For example, Alisoun places great emphasis on the "auctoritee" of the scripture when referencing to "the Apostle," "the Parables of Solomon" and "Jobes pacience" however, she undermines this authority when adopting language which reinforces her immoral nature such as "my bel chose" (pretty thing- a euphemism for her vagina) and "For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal."

To conclude, both writers provide an indefinite answer the question of whether their characters are immoral or virtuous however through this

deliberate ambiguity, it is apparent that there is tension between the views of men and women, ordinary folk and clergy men towards morality and virtue. Both female protagonists are motivated by their desire for independence, whether it is sexually or through female education. Arguably, the immoral presentation of Alisoun is far more controversial than Sheridan's Lydia, however interestingly both their efforts are unsuccessful due to the futility of passion and lust in patriarchal society.