

A medieval game of geoffrey chaucer

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Perhaps no medieval work of literature is as rich in the concept of games and play as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The tales are framed by the very idea of a game, i. e. the game of telling stories while on a pilgrimage. However, the real games in the tales are those that emerge through the stories that the pilgrims tell. For example, "The Miller's Tale" and "Wife of Bath's Prologue" highlight that games that women play in the context of their relationships with men. The fact that the two female characters in question are both named "Alison" adds to the irony and perhaps implies that Chaucer is also playing a game with the reader.

The first Alison encountered in both Bradshaw and Ellesmere's standard order of the *Canterbury Tales* is the Alison of "The Miller's Tale." This character's attitude and strength seem to be connected to her age, as she is described first and foremost as "wilde and yong" (117). Because she is so young and her husband, John the Carpenter, is so old and controlling, it is no surprise to the reader that she is so easily convinced to have an affair with the young clerk, Nicholas. While it is Nicholas who first makes advances, Alison is an active participant in the affair, and takes part in the plot to trick her husband: "Nicholas and Alisoun / Accorded been to this conclusion, / That Nicholas shal shapen hem a wile" (293-95). Besides implying that Alison is enjoying the affair, this is the reader's first real clue as to how active of a participant Alison is in the upcoming game of deception. Her true "play" comes in not much later when the other love-struck clerk, Absolon, asks to see her. She responds harshly, cursing him and his request in the name of twenty devils (605), and then comes up with the idea to trick him into kissing her "naked ers" (626). It is also important to note that Alison is the only one

that is not punished for the part she plays. While Nicholas ends up burnt, John breaks his leg and is considered crazy, and Absolon has kissed Alison's rear, Alison herself does not suffer in the slightest. With this, Chaucer invites the reader to view Alison as the one with the power in this game. Even before the Wife of Bath's perspective is introduced, the idea that women have the control in such situations has already been voiced.

This idea continues with the second Alison, the Wife of Bath. The game that is introduced in Alison of Bath's "Prologue" is the game of manipulation and deception. She states clearly that her first three husbands were "hoolly in [her] hand" and that she thoroughly controlled them (217). She trained them to bring her presents, and "were ful glade whan I spak hem faire," for when she criticized them it was "spitously" and cruelly (227-29). Mostly, this Alison shows that her power to manipulate lies in her words. She either praises or criticizes based on what is needed to get what she wants.

Critic Elaine Hansen comments that the Wife of Bath "views words as strategic weapons, like sex and money, in the war between the sexes, and she describes her verbal tactics as repayment in kind against the men in her life" (Hansen 28). This "repayment" through language is uniquely connected to the position of women in medieval culture. As implied by the misogynist writings referenced by the Wife of Bath's last husband, Jankin, women were largely expected to be submissive and obey their husbands. If a woman's temperament did not meet this standard, it was largely acceptable for husbands to "control" or beat their wives. This idea is especially conveyed in the physical violence Jankin uses against Alison; at one point, he hits her

hard enough to make her deaf in one ear (674). A parallel can also be drawn between the Alison of Bath's situation and the jealous control that John the Carpenter tries to hold over the Alison of "The Miller's Tale." In both situations, the women use cunning and language to fight back. While the initial trickery, deception, and language play used to control their husbands is clearly depicted as a game, this contrary view can also be seen as a method of basic survival. The men in this patriarchal structure have social and physical power; the women's language play and control games are comparatively harmless, but perhaps essential.

It is impossible, of course, to definitively discern the reaction of Chaucer's original audience. After all, both stories draw on the anti-feminist writings that were popular during the period. However, by having the Alison from "The Miller's Tale" escape punishment and by having the Alison from "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" succeed in winning the power in her relationship with Jankin, Chaucer seems to be not only showing the importance of the women's actions, but even endorsing them. However, by having both characters recall the women in anti-feminist writings, their roles as the "winners" in their love games becomes somewhat problematic. Regardless of Chaucer's intended moral, it is clear that both Alisons have played surprisingly similar games and are similar in their implied or stated values. Also, perhaps because of their less powerful status as women in medieval culture, the women show no remorse about playing tricks on their men; instead, they act more like children who, as Alison from "The Wife of Bath" states, would welcome the chance to do it all again.

Works Cited

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