

# Wife of bath as an exegete



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Chaucer, at least on the surface, recreates the commonly perceived stereotype of a vile woman in Alisoun; and as D. W. Robertson in Chaucer's Exegetes states, " She is but an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude." Alisoun is portrayed as somewhat of an iconoclast, transgressive to the core, and raucous and incorrigible to boot. In fact, her attempted demeanour as a preacher was an act of rebellion in itself, for it was and is still generally forbidden for women to preach. Alisoun's expression and actions seem to be fully governed by self-interest, as can be seen through her selective exegesis of the Bible, wherein lies the amusing irony of it all - that she uses the same source as her ecclesiastical counterparts to undermine them. Therefore, at one level she doesn't subvert the established status quo altogether but merely provides her own perspective to counter the dogmatic patriarchal viewpoint. Alisoun fuels her rhetoric with seemingly relevant aphorisms, proverbs and Biblical references to justify her life-choices, and she employs the same generally acknowledged authority to suit her own cause through biased interpretations. However, at times, Alisoun comes across as almost desperate in her attempts at self-justification, such as when she uses astrological associations to Mars and Venus for the purpose. This could be taken as a subconscious conformity on her part, and as a result, it could further be said that while seeming to be free of social limitations on one hand, Alisoun still seeks acceptance from the same society that looks down upon women such as her. Consequently, she wasn't entirely free even if she tried to come across as a free thinker.

On the other hand, it could also be explained as self-assertion, a conscious attempt of a vivacious woman to stand up for her beliefs, be it material hedonism or otherwise, against the shackles of tradition and dogma, as she chooses to enter the male domain of preaching to defeat the established opinion on their own turf, albeit, on her terms. Despite her revolutionary take on the Bible, she never undermines the authority of God, rather her ire is directed towards the common misinterpretation of His words by the Church. On this note, a parallel could be drawn to Milton's feelings as voiced in Christian Doctrine, where he credits sole authority to the Bible; expounding that individuals must work out their faith on their own through the study of the scripture without regarding any other opinions. This could also be viewed as Chaucer's own commentary upon the social circumstances of his time. Thus, it could be argued that through Alisoun, Chaucer voiced a feminist character even before the movement was said to be born. For indeed, Alisoun does take up many important issues pertaining to women's rights and marriage, although her methods might not be entirely convincing.

One must understand that the Bible like any other scriptural text is quite ambivalent and thus can often be interpreted at various levels. As mentioned before, Alisoun happens to choose a vein that suits her purpose even if it isn't commonly accepted. What gives her arguments due strength is that she reinforces them in the guise of pragmatic common sense and corroborates them with instances from the Bible, which to any layman without a complete knowledge of the scripture, would seem entirely convincing. Therefore, one can be sure of the fact that Alisoun was a clever, well-read and wily orator. Moreover, the General Prologue confirms that she was well travelled and as

Alisoun herself emphasizes, she was an adequately experienced woman. She could further be credited by the observation that she is seen to turn the argument onto others, as seen in her relationship to her husbands, i. e. she forces her opponents to justify and explain even if she's the one deemed to be in the wrong, which is clearly a sign of a skilled debater.

Moreover, her arguments do follow a certain logic, even if that too is contrived as per her own interest, such as with regard to her interpretation of Pauline doctrines. All in all, it could be argued that there is an affability about her caricatured character despite her brashness. Besides, she accepts her own faults even though she might try to defend or be dismissive of them; as she remarks, she might not be perfect, but is that a crime? She refuses to adhere to the common beliefs and rituals prescribed by the Church, as she would rather confess her misdemeanours unto her close friends than to the priest as per the norm. Even during the period of Lent, she is seen to go about flirting with strangers and seeking new lovers at social congregations while her husband is away. In fact, it was during this period that she professed her love to Janekin and promised to marry him once her fourth husband was dead. Following which, although, she did put up a customary show of grief as a widow, she was lusting for Janekin at the same time. Therefore, again, it is evident that at some level, Alisoun as an individual was still repressed by social mores. However, she could not be blamed for it, since after all, she was a woman living in the fourteenth century. Here, Chaucer could be reflecting upon the futility of such rules and regulations, for though actions might be curtailed, but who can control thought?

Alisoun's most profound and logical riposte against anti-feminist doctrines such as those written by St. Jerome, remains - " Who peyntede the leoun, tel me, who?" This particular quip, using the Aesopian fable as a reference, captures the essence of her argument, namely that men being the dominating gender, it is but obvious that the texts written by them should glorify their stature while diminishing that of women. Consequently, further Marxist overtones could be applicable here. The heartening irony here would be that it is a male writer speaking through a female voice, and in the same vein, the destruction of Janekin's book could be taken as a symbolic optimism coming from Chaucer.

In this section, a few extracts shall be discussed pertaining to Alisoun's disregard towards the teachings of the Church.

Regarding the allowed number of marriages

(Prologue 10-14) " That sith that Crist...for the nones"

Most preachers of the time like St. Jerome frowned upon remarriages and to support this they often used arguments such as throughout the Bible, Christ attends only one marriage, i. e. the one at Cana, and therefore it is understood that people must marry only once. However, Alisoun doesn't mince any words to voice her opinion on the matter, for it is clear that it is a foolish and baseless interpretation. Therefore, it is interesting to note that Alisoun wasn't all that different from the preachers of her time, when it comes to partial exegesis.

Similarly, Alisoun dismisses the tale of Jesus and the Samaritan woman with five husbands in her characteristic cheeky manner. After which, she proceeds to use literal interpretations of select Biblical verses to support her view regarding marriage and sex. She refers to the book of Genesis where God is said to have commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. However, in this regard, it might be interesting to note that nowhere in the text does one find any indication whether Alisoun bore any children from her five marriages.

Alisoun then, further recalls the verse Matthew 19. 5: " A man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife" to claim that the Bible says all of this but nowhere does it say that a person may not marry more than once, to silence her critics and counter their accusations against remarriage. In this regard, she also brings up the legendary king Solomon who was supposed to have 700 wives and 300 concubines, and yet was deemed a man of God.

" For thane th'Apostle seith that I am free

To wedde, a Goddes half, where it lyketh me"

While St. Paul meant this as an exception and a secondary resort for people with deceased spouses, Alisoun construes it as a license for unlimited marriages. She then continues to enlist instances of multiple marriages in the Bible such as Abraham and Jacob.

Regarding Virginity and Sex

(Prologue 62-67) " Where comanded he virginitee...conseilling is no comandement"

In these lines, Alisoun continues in her vociferous tone, demanding where exactly does God command virginity of his people; she then says that while at best, virginity might be advocated in Christianity, but nowhere is it explicitly commanded and therefore, to each their own, for God made each of us unique and different. She echoes the sentiment in the following line while misappropriating St. Jerome's bread analogy at the same time:

" Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,

And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed "

Thus, Alisoun advocates a very practical approach to the issue - let the individuals make their own choice, be it celibacy or marriage. She then proceeds to mock St. Jerome by asking how would the world function if everyone were to be a virgin - " If ther were no seed y-sowe, virginitee, thane wherof sholde it growe?" Continuing in the same tongue in cheek manner, Alisoun then raises the question that if God meant us to be virgins, why did he create the organs of reproduction; was it a mere oversight on his part, and doesn't it mean that the Church is implying that God was wrong?

She follows this with a resolution of lust in the lines: " In wyfhode I wol use myn instrument as frely as my Makere hath it sent" and then finally finishes the argument with yet another perversion of Pauline sentiment, claiming the right unto her husband's body and therefore, uninhibited sex as and when she demands.

## Regarding Marriage and Adultery

(Prologue 326-336) "Of alle men...nat pleyne thee"

In these lines, Alisoun employs the Ptolemaic proverb to try and justify her adulterous ways by claiming that as long as her husband gets his share of sex each night, why should he care about her infidelity during the day? She further distorts the common Biblical metaphor for life and positivity, a flame, by presenting it in the same unflattering context - "He is to greet a niggard that wol werne a man to lighte a candle at his lanterne". In these arguments, the wife's clear but flawed and self-serving logic is more than evident.

Regarding St. Paul's insistence on austerity in dressing and manner, and the corollary drawn by preachers that it would inhibit a woman's licentiousness, Alisoun is quick to draw a feline analogy saying wouldn't a cat be as restless even if it's fur was burnt and scarred? Similarly, wouldn't an adulterous woman serve her purpose regardless of her getup, for in the end, isn't it all about desire? Therefore, Alisoun was wont to dress up flamboyantly even in her widowed state.

Finally, she claims a natural justification for her apparent flaws - "Deceite, weping, spinning God hath yive to wommen kindly whyll they may live"

## Regarding the Marital Equation

"Whoso that first to mille comth, first grint.

I pleynd first: so was oure werre y-stint."



Here, Alisoun warps yet another proverb to express her dominion over her husbands, wherein, she also reverses the traditional conjugal roles as mentioned in the Bible in the book of Genesis, where Adam is deemed superior to Eve. Alisoun, instead vouches for a somewhat practical though equally inane approach where the first to quarrel gains the upper hand in the relationship.

Alisoun concludes with a Biblical reference to Job, advocating his patience unto men, for they often liked to preach about it.