

# The wife of bath as a feminist character



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While reading Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, it is apparent that the Wife of Bath is not a normal woman. She acts out in many different ways and catches the attention of everyone in doing so. These actions make her stand out as an independent woman who is trying to break the constraints of society. Chaucer has adequately sculpted the Wife of Bath as a feminist character through her prologue by acting in ways customarily reserved for men, by controlling her husbands instead of vice versa, and by being open with her sexuality.

The most evident aspect of the Wife of Bath that makes her a feminist character is her many actions that are atypical for a woman who lived in the 14th century. Most women did not have occupations and were housewives, but Lady Alisoun was a capable cloth-maker. In the general prologue, Chaucer describes her cloth making skills showing "so great a bent she bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent" (Chaucer 15). Ypres and Ghent were famous cloth making centers in Belgium (Hodges 360). Mary Carruthers also agrees with this idea: "[t]here is every reason to believe that Alisoun's cloth making ... was big business" (Carruthers 210).

Lady Alisoun somehow managed to acquire or start a very successful cloth making business. It is doubtful that very many women, if any at all, could say that they owned a business of any sort, not to mention one that is even more successful than the top cloth making centers in Europe at the time.

Nonetheless, it would not be unusual for a woman to assist her husband in running a business, although the husband was more often than not the one who actually owned the business. This was by no means a small

accomplishment; it was extremely rare for a woman to accomplish such a feat during her time.

Another uncommon characteristic of Alisoun is her financial independence. After a short interaction with the Pardoner, she continues her personal tale and mentions that her husbands “[had] given [her] their treasure” and “yielded [her] their gold and land” (Chaucer 264). In *The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions*, Mary Carruthers supports this point when she says, “[w]e can thus reasonably suppose that the Wife did indeed own ... all the property her husbands had given to her and that she was accustomed to trade in her own name” (Carruthers 210).

The Wife of Bath’s society was largely based on a fundamentally patriarchal system, which made it normal for the men to own all of the property and, in some cases, their wives. One perspective on this point, by Theresa Tinkle, is that “[f]inancial independence equates with autonomous sexual desires and with separation from patriarchal interests” (Tinkle 286). Lady Alisoun did not have to depend on a husband to provide for her, so she did not have to face any sort of repression by one.

This cements the fact that Alisoun is rising above the “norm” and constraints of society by possessing her own financial freedom, which is exactly what feminist characters are created to do. Alisoun also frequently travelled by herself on pilgrimages. She journeyed to Jerusalem three times and to Rome, Boulogne, St. James of Compostella, and Cologne once each (Chaucer 15). In general, however, husbands were in charge of their wives and would most likely have not allowed them to travel alone.

Carruthers believes that the “ husband deserves control of the wife because he controls the estate” (Carruthers 214). Alisoun, on the other hand, controlled her own estate and, as a result, was not controlled by her husbands. Therefore, she was able to “ own herself” one might say. She could then make more of her own decisions and participate in what she wants to do, rather than what her husband wanted to do. Carruthers goes on further to say that sovereignty lies with whomever possesses the wealth (Carruthers 214). As previously mentioned, Lady Alisoun was financially independent.

She possessed her own wealth, and probably far more than what any of her husbands had; in a patriarchal society such as hers, men were the ones with sovereignty, so Alisoun obviously stuck out like a sore thumb since she was sovereign over her husbands. An additional point of evidence that Lady Alisoun is a feminist character is that she did not let her husbands control her, but actually had the control over her husbands. Once Alisoun begins telling her fellow pilgrims about her past husbands, it is evident that she was the one who was always in control, rather than being controlled like most, if not all, other women were at the time.

Alisoun was adept at reflecting the blame from her onto her husbands whenever they start to argue with her “[f]or [she] could bite and whinney like a horse and launch complaints when things were all [her] fault” (Chaucer 269). Typically women were subservient to their husbands, which is antonymous with Alisoun’s actions. Barrie Straus concurs by saying, “[t]he Wife reverses the stereotype of the chiding wife by advising women simply

to throw the patterns of male chiding and misogynist complaints back at their husbands” (Straus 533).

Alisoun strongly believes in this idea: “[a] knowing wife if she is worth her salt can always prove her husband is at fault” (Chaucer 264). At another point in her prologue, she says that women are supposed to be clever, though, so this is all just part of a woman’s job in her eyes. Jankyn, her fifth husband, was an exception until Alisoun finally broke him, which is evident when he says, ‘ My own and truest wife, do as you please for all the rest of life, but guard your honour and my good estate” (Chaucer 280). After having to live under Jankyn’s control, Alisoun finally gains her sovereignty back.

This is a pivotal moment for her because she did not have any trouble controlling her other four husbands, while Jankyn proved to be difficult to dominate and, through perseverance, managed to eventually demoralize him and come out on top. By being the dominant adult in her marriages, Alisoun demonstrates a strong character that is an exception to the standards of women during her time. In bed Alisoun was controlling as well. She “ would never abide in bed with them if hands began to slide till they had a promised ransom, paid a fee: and then [she] let them do their nicety” (Chaucer 269).

Marriage and intercourse have a very strong connection to economic gain in Alisoun’s mind. In most cases it seems as if she marries merely to gain the property of her husbands after their deaths. Tison Pugh corroborates this concept when he says, “ This blatant consumerist impulse of self-prostitution in marriage showcases the Wife of Bath exploitative views of sexuality”

because she can see “ through the poetry of courtly love to the raw economics underneath” (Pugh 124), which is exactly how she has made all of her financial progress in life so far.

She received not only economic rewards, but she also received a reward of pleasure if her husbands had worked hard enough. In Lady Alisoun’s society, it would be looked upon as the duty of the wife to tend to her husband’s needs, although Alisoun never let her husbands get off that easy since she made them work. This element of control shows her refusing to kowtow to the standard principles of her time. Throughout The Wife of Bath’s prologue, there is a strong emphasis on the sexuality of women.

Lady Alisoun makes it very clear that she is not afraid to be open with her sexuality at the beginning of her prologue when she says, “ would it to God it were allowed to me to be refreshed, aye, half so much as he” (Chaucer 259) about how King Solomon must have had intercourse with each of his thousand wives on numerous occasions. Using another allusion to the Bible, Lady Alisoun justifies her multiple marriages: “ so says the Apostle, I am free to wed, o’ God’s name, where it pleases me” (Chaucer 259).

Theresa Tinkle backs this with “ the Wife of Bath ... seeks in Scripture only what will legitimate her desire for remarriage, talking back to the authorities who counsel sexual renunciation” (Tinkle 268). Alisoun also uses Bible scripture to justify having sex: “ God bade us all to wax and multiply” (Chaucer 259). Here it is obvious that she is somewhat twisting the meaning of a Bible verse to suit her needs. Based on these personal interpretations of

the Bible, it is obvious that from Alisoun's point of view she did nothing wrong by being open with her sexual desires.

In addition to an emphasis on women's sexuality, there is an emphasis on weakening male sexuality. Lady Alisoun tells the other pilgrims how she would " laugh outright remembering how [she] made [her husbands] work at night" (Chaucer 264). By relentlessly insulting and "[p]ublicly humiliating [her husbands] for inadequate sexual performance, Alison laughs at their failures to fulfill their sexual obligations to her" (Pugh 125). Tison Pugh continues on to say that this " denies male sexuality its privileged position" (Pugh 125).

By insulting her husbands, it seems as if she is trying to make them work harder to please her and break their spirits so they do not resist her will. In doing so she gains more sexual pleasure in bed and stronger control over her husbands. Through this domineering of her husbands, Lady Alisoun has gained control over them and what goes on in bed. At the beginning of her prologue, Alisoun puts a great deal of effort into justifying her sexual behavior. She lists several allusions to the Bible and makes interpretations of them, which strengthen her argument and support her beliefs.

If her behavior was normal or socially acceptable during the 14th century, then she wouldn't have had to defend herself. The Catholic Church, at this point in time, " only recognized the procreative purposes of intercourse" (Henningsen 1). Alisoun, on the other hand, did not only have sex with her husbands to procreate, but to appease her sexual desires. There is no evidence of her ever wanting to have children or that she ever did have any.

Even though her society did not condone her practices, Alisoun's resolve to remain an autonomous woman did not waver.

In conclusion the Wife of Bath, Lady Alisoun, is shown to be a feminist character. She was a strong, independent woman, who did not run around bending to the wills of men. She had great financial success, reversed the role of sovereignty in each of her marriages, and was not ashamed to be sexually open. All three of those traits or actions were abnormal for women in society at her time. She was pushing the constrictions of society, which is essentially what defines a feminist character.