

Chaucer and perception of women

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The character of Alison, who tells the tale of *The Wife of Bath* in *Canterbury Tales*, is one of the most complex and outspoken narrators written by Geoffrey Chaucer. Her confident and sarcastic remarks are especially controversial given the social norms of the time. She is clearly a strong and independent woman, and Chaucer seems to paint her to overemphasize those qualities - sometimes a little too much. Chaucer's depiction of Alison in *The Wife of Bath* prologue seems to reveal more about men in society than women, illustrating how startling it is for men to see a woman treat them how they have always been treating women. The character of Alison serves as a larger reflection on society's views of marriage and virginity, and Chaucer uses her voice to question how a female is supposed to fit into these roles - or if they should at all. Lines 106-113 provide a detailed look into Alison's views and attitude toward society, indicating Chaucer's true motives.

Chaucer seems to separate Alison from God as much as possible, which is particularly evident in this specific passage. The words "perfection" and "perfectly" are referenced three times in just these ten lines, and all are tied with God, linking him as a perfect being. She claims that God is the source of perfection in this world, and seems to keep herself at a distance from this ideal. She separates herself from this narrative by frankly stating "gentlemen, by your leave, I am not that" (Chaucer 112). Alison seems to have no shame about her lifestyle, and instead she freely admits that she lives the way she desires, valuing her own happiness over her husband's or anyone else's. This passage says a lot about Chaucer and the way he views women. If Alison does not follow the social norms, she is viewed as lesser in

the eyes of Chaucer, and therefore lesser in the eyes of God. He really emphasizes the idea that God is a perfect standard and Alison falls short of that.

Alison puts a lot of emphasis on the concept of virginity, and again compares it to perfection. She says that virginity is “ great perfection, And continence also with devotion” (Chaucer 106-07), where she clearly acknowledges the validity of virginity in the context of religious expression. While she is a rather bold and outspoken narrator, she isn't disrespecting those who wish to save their virginity until marriage, but simply saying that she is not one of those people. In a time with strict religious rules in society, Chaucer is writing a bold character with Alison. To talk so openly about her sexuality, especially outside the context of marriage, was quite taboo in this time. She reiterates this idea earlier in the prologue by saying “ The prize is set up for virginity; Catch it whoever can, let's see who runs best” (Chaucer 75-76). Describing virginity as a “ prize” brings to light the flaws with putting too much weight on losing one's virginity. It seems like more of a race to get there first, rather than finding the right person for the right reasons. Having a bold and brash woman like Alison bring this up would be especially thought provoking for the reader. But her promiscuity does not revolutionize a woman's role during this period. Instead, it links her empowerment directly to her sexuality, showing how little self worth she feels outside of this.

While Alison's sexual promiscuity and confidence may paint her as a feminist figure on the surface, Chaucer's overly dramatized depiction seems to feed into the negative stereotype of women during this time. Women were

defined by their relationship to men, rather than their own personal achievements or autonomy. The title of the prologue, *The Wife of Bath*, is a perfect example of this. Rather than titling it *Alison*, the narrator's name, Chaucer chose to define her as a wife first. While *Alison* is portrayed as an independent woman, she still finds her value and worth in her relationship with men. She over emphasizes her own sexuality because that is the root of her self worth, stating that " I will bestow the flower of all my age In the acts and fruit of marriage" (Chaucer 113-114). Going directly against feminist ideals, she believes that her only value lies in her sexuality. The " flower of my age" relates back to fertility, which diminishes the older a woman gets. She knows that her time is running out to be desirable, and she is capitalizing on that. " The acts and fruit of marriage" is simply the only thing she feels a marriage should be about: sex. She never references marriage in the context of love, but rather in lust.

Alison also references the Bible several times in her argument, but seems to misinterpret the text and skew it in her favor. She states that God " Did not command that every one should go sell All that he had, and give it to the poor, And in such wise follow him and his footsteps" (Chaucer 108-10). She gets hung up on the idea that you must be perfect to do so, which is stated in the Bible. This is a direct summary of a bible verse in Matthew saying, " Jesus told him, ' If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me'" (Matthew 19: 21). But in the Bible, it is clear that humanity is nowhere near perfection, and instead the idea of being " perfect" is simply being closer to God's desires for humanity. In this instance,

they could seek Godly perfection by being selfless and giving. Alison seems to reject these ideals simply because she is clinging on to the idea that her actions distance herself from God. As a satirical writer, this says more about Chaucer's motives than the character of Alison herself. For someone as bold and outspoken as Alison, she seems to be rather uneducated about the Bible. While Chaucer gave a woman a voice, he gave her one that's rather misinformed and poorly thought out, playing into the idea that women aren't capable of critically thinking or understanding complex concepts. It seems that Alison is simply masking her insecurities by looking for any sort of justification for her actions.

This skewed sense of self is illustrated in the tale she chooses to tell. The woman in the tale is completely undesirable and old, making it difficult for the knight to desire her for marriage, further illustrating Alison's idea that a woman's body is her most valuable asset. The woman was "foul, and old, and poor" (Chaucer 1220), but still had a lot to offer. The knight couldn't look past her poor looks to realize this and resented the fact that he was forced into marriage with her. The prologue provides a profile of Alison, and helps the reader understand why she chose to tell the tale she is telling. Chaucer seems to be taking a look at society's views on women and reversing gender roles, just as he did in the prologue. The knight was so appalled at the idea of marrying someone he didn't desire, but this was a reality for many women during this time. Marriage was seen as a way to gain money and status, not love. By detailing a prologue that shows a bold woman in control followed by a tale that puts a man in a vulnerable position, Chaucer is taking a stab at traditional gender roles.

The Wife of Bath prologue in Canterbury Tales serves an important function in the discussion of feminism, marriage and gender roles of the time. As a satirical writer, Chaucer uses the character of Alison to expose the flaws in society, from the concept of virginity to the role of God. Although he paints her as a feminist, Chaucer seems to paint Alison in a rather negative light, exposing his inherent sexism and skewed view of women's behavior. Although there are flaws in his narrative, Chaucer provides a thought provoking look into how differently men and women are treated in society. Whether the reader sees Alison as a strong feminist role model or a rude and brash woman, she serves an important function in giving a voice to a group of people who typically never had one.

Works Cited

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