The Wife of Bath: Sexuality vs. Symbol

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Avec un certain succès, Chaucer et son Wife of Bath *lancent un défi à la croyance médiévale que les femmes doivent être totalement bonnes ou totalement mauvaises.*

A drawing adapted from William Blake's illustrations for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.*

In the figure of the *Wife of Bath*, Chaucer has given us one of the favourite women of all English literature. Alisoun is lusty, crude, iconoclastic, gleefully selfish and smugly lecherous, with a bold, handsome face, ample hips and an unabashed appetite for power. Her signs are an amorous Venus and the warlike Mars: she is aggressive towards men (she has had five husbands and buried them all) and competitive towards other women.

In the prologue to her Tale she reveals herself to her fellow pilgrims at length and broadly. She basks in the spotlight as she relives the saga of her five marriages (blithely misquoting scripture to justify her serial polygamy) and details her methods for gaining conjugal control. She is a veritable encyclopedia of medieval misogynistic stereotypes and her tactic is to attribute these qualities — lechery, vanity, greed, shrewishness, deception — to herself before anyone else has a chance. The theory, evidently, is that the best defense is a good offense; assertiveness training she does not need.

Alisoun is a woman bursting with vitality and humour. She works enthusiastically (she's a successful cloth-manufacturer), travels extensively (three trips to Jerusalem so far), dresses ostentatiously (scarlet stockings and a pair of spurs, a hat as big as a shield); and she makes love voraciously (pilgrimage or no, it's obvious she'd far rather find an earthly lover than a heavenly one).

A remarkable aspect of Chaucer's achievement is

that he has presented us with such a resolutely whole, flesh-and-blood woman. Fraught as the Middle Ages were with hopeless ambivalence towards women (Eve vs. Mary, Satan's sidekick vs. God's handmaiden), and steeped in the literary tradition of allegory, women tended to be portrayed in a somewhat two-dimensional manner. Langland, a contemporary of Chaucer, includes two key female figures in his *Vision of Piers the Ploughman*. On the one hand we have Holy Church, a gentle, motherly figure who tries to help the poet/dreamer on his quest for Truth. She speaks with wisdom and at length, and we know she is lovely but we are not given a physical description. In the opposite corner is the alluring but sinister figure of Meed (= bribery) the Maid, daughter of the Father of Falsehood. Meed is very sexy and shrewd in a narrow kind of way and succeeds in corrupting just about everyone she comes in contact with.

Then there's the heroine of the 13th century *Romance of the Rose*, who never manages to appear at all: she is presented piecemeal, one attribute at a time. Some of her qualities are positive (such as Fair Welcome) and some are negative (Fear and Shame). The bias is the lover's; we care about his success but as a character the Lady is a Bomb.

Dante's Beatrice and the maiden in the 14th century poem *Pearl* are flawless angelic guides. They possess great physical beauty but it only mirrors their inner perfection and its effect is to create a higher level of spiritual understanding in the men who love them. These two are extraordinary figures, reverently created and inspiring us with admiration.

But to get back to the Wife of Bath, it's hard to imagine that she wouldn't have found these heroines a royal pain in the neck. She, after all, is the one who had to live with that crazy ambivalence, who had these impossible ideals held up to her as models. Gutsy as she is, Chaucer shows that she (*even* she) is a partial casualty of an either/or (either/whore?) tradition that allows no winners.

Some of the damage is suggested in her prologue, when she is talking about herself; it's a bit like an anti-confession, with her saying 'this is what I'm like, there's no way I'm going to change, and if you don't like it . . . .' But she says so rather too loudly and too often and we begin to be uneasy at her extraordinary defensiveness, her fear of losing her 'currency' as she gets older, the undercurrent of self-hatred as she reveals all her worst qualities (to an audience that is almost exclusively male).

But the Wife's real vulnerability shows through when she thinks she's out of the spotlight, when she's telling her Tale. Her story is a piece of Arthurian fantasy but with a couple of twists: the knight is a rapist and the heroine is an ugly old hag. At the opening, he is spared from execution for rape on condition that, within a year and a day, he find the answer to the following question: what is it that women most desire? Three-hundred-and-sixty-six days later he is none the wiser but on the way home he runs into the hag. She says she'll go with him to court and provide him with the answer — which turns out to be that women want 'sovereynetee' over their men — if he will then grant her wish. He readily agrees and thus escapes execution. But the next snag is that she wants him to marry her, a prospect from which he recoils with scorn and horror, but which, nonetheless, he cannot escape. On the wedding night, the hag's heart of gold becomes apparent. She gives the knight a long and eloquent sermon on the importance of 'gentilesse' (= kindness, courtesy, nobility of heart), pointing out that it has nothing to do with looks or social class or money, all of which he presumably has; but still he is a brute. The 'education' of her reluctant spouse culminates with a choice: would he rather have her, his wife, old, ugly and loyal, or young, beautiful and unfaithful? Stymied, he tells her that the decision is up to her. Thus she gains the (for Alisoun, we assume) longed-for sovereignty. But does she abuse her power? On the contrary, she grants the fairy-tale combination: youth, beauty, fidelity, happily-ever after.

Now this is not the kind of tale we would have expected from the Wife. The Canterbury Tales include a number of hilarious, bawdy yarns which would seem, at first glance, to be far more appropriate. So we look farther into the story of the hag: why does she tell it and what does it reveal about this woman who, in her prologue, has done such a boisterous job of establishing her defenses?

There has to be an element of wish-fulfillment. She likely identifies with the hag: people think she is hateful (especially after she tells them so often enough) but really she has all kinds of tenderness and wisdom to offer. The old woman, in the course of the story, emerges as a kind of Beatrice-Pearl figure, in that she saves the 'hero', first from execution, then spiritually, as he finally becomes gentle, chivalrous and loving. And the hag's physical transformation could be said to conform with this same tradition in which outer appearance corresponds to the beautiful inner reality.

But the education, however spiritual, does take place in bed and is presumably (knowing Alisoun) followed by a dynamite consummation. Here's where the real wishful thinking comes in, because the tradition does not allow for a salacious angel. It's got to be one or the other and, given her appetites, there's really no question of a choice. In her fantasy/tale the synthesis can occur, though even there she feels she has to make herself 'good' (faithful) in the end. The complaint of her prologue — 'allas! allas! that evere love was synne!' — takes on a new poignance: the admission of her sexuality means, inevitably, exile from virtue.

Alisoun, however, is no whiner and having accepted the situation, characteristically embraces it. She simply refuses to be a symbol. There could be no more appropriate figure than the Wife of Bath to show the limitations of the common medieval attitude towards women, and indeed, how much stands to be lost through such a wholesale denial of reality. She, and Chaucer, are sick of it.