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Chaucer:
An Understanding
of the Sexes

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Acknowledgments

During my undergraduate years, *The Canterbury Tales* was a class that I avoided like the plague simply because I was told it was a horrible class. It was in my first semester of graduate studies that I realized *The Canterbury Tales* was a required class. Fr. Brian Connolly taught the course and it was due to his excellent teaching skills, background and love for *The Tales* that essentially evoked in me, a similar love for the pilgrims, the plots and the humor encompassed within Chaucer’s work.

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Contents

Introduction

I. The Medieval Place of Chaucer 1

II. The Critics Speak 8

III. A Close Look at the Wife of Bath 29

IV. The Triumphant Woman Arrives 50

V. What’s in a Name 64

VI. The Other Side 77

Conclusion
God made woman from man's rib—
not from his head to top him,
nor from his feet to be walked upon;
but from his side to be his partner in life,
from under his arm to be protected by him,
and from near his heart to be loved by him.

-Anonymous
Introduction

Among the few great works that critics as a whole can continue to extol are *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer. There has been an ongoing controversy as to Chaucer’s intentions regarding characters and themes in the *Tales* dating back to the late 1300’s in which they are said to have been written.¹ Chaucer has been credited with being a warrior of women’s rights for the strength and voice he gives to some of the women in his tales, while other critics have argued that Chaucer is without a doubt a misogynist who uses the *Tales* for his abuse of women. But one theme that stands out for Chaucer seems to be his understanding of men and women, “women and the relationships between the sexes are Chaucer’s favourite subject”.² And this is something we will see.

The growing list of critics in support and/or disagreement of Chaucer can not possibly be covered, but there are a number of critics whose ideas stand out. The divergence is primarily concerning Chaucer’s attitude concerning women. Derek Pearsall is among the critics in high favor of Chaucer and his works. In *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Pearsall traces the life of Chaucer from his professional life to his private, spanning from childhood to his death. A variety of the tales, characters and themes are viewed with more intensity while still giving a great deal of background information into Chaucer the man. In addition, Pearsall also discusses Chaucer’s relationship with women and how Chaucer positively depicts women in his works.³ While Pearsall looks closely at Chaucer’s background and private life, Peggy Knapp concentrates more on the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales* and how they each fit into society. She studies the storytelling contest and the different characters as they tell their
tales. Knapp also discusses in great detail the feminist issue and does not view it as a major problem in Chaucer’s works. Ruth M. Ames is another critic writing in honor of Chaucer although she does not believe that Chaucer can be classified as a feminist because he did not consistently write in praise of women. She does assert, however, that Chaucer never meant any harm or negativity toward women and, in fact, paid them great homage quite often.

On the negative side are those who do not support Chaucer and find him and his works to be misogynistic on the feminist issue. One of these critics is Elaine Tuttle Hansen who finds that Chaucer has been misinterpreted as a protofeminist. She finds that Chaucer has negated female experience through the Tales and she challenges the notion that Chaucer was a master of English poetry. Sheila Delany is in support of Hansen in her works in which she charges Chaucer (along with his predecessors such as Homer) as being a misogynist. She argues that any evidence that may suggest otherwise is simply Chaucer’s way of defending himself from such charges.

One must remember the time period which Chaucer wrote, the expectations of men and women in medieval times were fairly standard and acceptable, yet in the 19th century Chaucer is accused of being antifeminist for creating the majority of women in his tales according to the medieval prototype. However, Chaucer did create two tales (The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and The Miller’s Tale) in which the women are strong and even victorious over the men. Coincidentally enough, each of these women shares the name Alisoun. Chaucer certainly was not antifeminist considering these two strong women and the awareness he displays of women’s wisdom; if anything, he provided a unique understanding of the sexes in medieval times.
According to Larry Benson, The General Prologue was written between 1388-92. From 1392-95 he suggests that most of The Canterbury Tales, including the Marriage Group, was written and finishing the latest of the Tales (The Nun's Priest's Tale, The Canon's Yeoman's Tale and The Parson's Tale) from 1396-1400. This chronology is only a much agreed upon hypothesis due to unknown exact dates of Chaucer's works. For more see The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) p. xxix.

Priscilla Martin, Chaucer's Women, (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1990) p. xiii. Martin studies the various women within Chaucer's works and how they contribute to his talents as a poet. She notes that Chaucer is very intrigued with people in general.

Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992). 1380 through the 1390's is studied extensively by Pearsall regarding how Chaucer's private life was reflected in his work and vice versa. The amount of material Pearsall covers on Chaucer is without a doubt an accurate and interesting account of the poet that is easily followed and understood on many levels.

Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Context (New York, Routledge, 1990). Knapp finds Chaucer a master in the way he created such true to life characters. One aspect in particular that is of special interest to Knapp is the way Chaucer depicted the roles of women and the new outlook he created for women considering the time period.

Ruth M. Ames, "The Feminist Connections of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women" in Chaucer in the Eighties, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1986). In her work, Ames looks at the changing times of England and where Chaucer stood through all of it. She discusses what many have believed to be his intentions in writing so many translations and she defends him for his task. She believes that Chaucer understood men and women.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992). Hansen looks at Chaucer and his works through a feminist perspective and finds fault with a great amount of his techniques, characters and themes. She finds that the women characters Chaucer has created are truly representations of "feminine absence and masculine anxiety".

Sheila Delany, "Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts" in Chaucer in the Eighties, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1986). Delany looks at the influences that Chaucer was under and reasons that he created women not only in accordance with what others wrote, but also in light of his own beliefs about woman and their place in society.
I. The Medieval Place of Chaucer

When Chaucer wrote his riveting tales, he did as most authors do and took in the consideration of demographics. For Chaucer, this meant a medieval society in which women “were denied social conceptualization, even existence as social—and historical—beings.”¹ Therefore, a great number of the women figures in The Canterbury Tales are typical of the woman of the 1300’s who is merely a subject of her husband and this was not questioned. Yet critics today seem to take Chaucer out of context and put him in today’s realm where women are liberated, independent, social and historical figures. In today’s society women gain position quite early which is in sharp contrast to the fourteenth century where women had little roles. Today Chaucer is often accused of being an antifeminist and even a misogynist. This supposition appears absurd if one takes a close look at medieval society and the status of women in the fourteenth century compared to twentieth century.

Research has shown that women were equivalent to property in Chaucer’s time. Girls were under their father’s control up until the time that they married; at which time the husband would take over the control of his new bride. “Medieval England was a very male-dominated society. In principle, every woman was supposed to be under the authority of a man. A girl was subject to her father until she married, at which time she would become subject to her husband.”²

When a woman did marry it was very common for it to be an arranged marriage by a parent or friend and equally common was a woman forced into a marriage. A man
may agree to an arranged marriage because the marriage could be beneficial to him in some way such as gaining a higher status in life or great deals of land. The wife had no power or right to anything in the marriage including the children, nor was wife beating uncommon.\(^3\) Chaucer creates such a husband with the controlling, jealous John in *The Miller’s Tale*, “Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage” (I,3224).\(^4\) This again was very common in the middle ages and the audience hearing the tale would not seem at all surprised at such a remark.

If the audience was accustomed to such degradation of women, it seems that Chaucer would not bother to create the strong woman who reigns victorious over the man:

> A particularly insistent question for him is that of women’s freedom and independence and their capacity to judge and act on the basis of a fully developed moral consciousness. All these faculties were systematically denied to women in the Middle Ages, and Chaucer is troubled both by the inhuman stupidity of the denial and also by the consequences to men if the rights of women as individuals are allowed.\(^5\)

This creation would seem to turn an audience off in Chaucer’s time, yet he created such characters. Could it simply be that Chaucer did not and would not accept the notion of women being treated as mere chattel? Chaucer is out of step with his contemporaries as he challenges the notion of the subordinate wife in the creation of the Alisouns, one of whom makes her husband a laughing stock (*Miller’s Tale*) and the other who belligerently reigns over her husbands (*Wife of Bath’s Prologue*). It seems that Chaucer created a few women whom he could be proud of. “... it is hard to suppose that a man of his poetic temperament did not sometimes write to please himself. He would have felt sometimes a motion of the spirit and composed because there was something which had
to ‘come out’". 6 This certainly seems to be the case with Chaucer and his women because he definitely went against the grain in their creation, which Benson would agree with, “the time of The Canterbury Tales is characterized by a profound shift in his ideas about poetry and the representation of English life” (xxix). 7 Chaucer did make a slight change of women’s status here and there, but at the same time, did not abandon the medieval woman altogether; he was writing for an audience after all.

Although Chaucer does keep in some instances to the medieval stereotypical woman, he goes out on a limb to create a counter woman who is strong and not subject to the man’s power, but in Chaucer’s time, those women are regarded as part of a story; they are not real. The men of the audience have no need to fear the liberated woman because what they are hearing from Chaucer is fiction. “He creates people who seem real ‘for the moment,’ but are not part of a surrounding atmosphere which holds them in place; who live and move but cast no shadows.” 8 The emancipated woman is severely misplaced considering Chaucer’s England where woman were not even “allowed to become citizens of a town,” 9 which can only lead one to assume that he created the strong woman out of his own hope and will. Critics today should keep in mind that just as contemporaries considered women part of a story then, so too should the critics consider them to be part of a story today. Chaucer should not be scrutinized for the lack of emancipated women because the characters should be considered and left as “part of the story.” Chaucer should not be criticized for not creating the futuristic woman of the 90’s who could have and would have shook up England. There are, after all, the unique women of Chaucer (Wife of Bath and The Miller’s Alison) that did set a new precedent of a woman’s true strength and for all practical purposes Chaucer’s creations did shake
things up a bit when one considers the critical talk he provoked in the 1380’s for creating such a radical as Alisoun of Bath:

There is even external evidence that the Wife of Bath had become something of a talking-point in London literary circles in the 1390’s... It is, in imagination, a miscellaneous company of lettered London men, to be appropriately scandalized and delighted by the Wife of Bath."\textsuperscript{10}

But as we will later see, critics find fault even with the Alisouns, who, in Chaucer’s time, would have been considered an outrage to make “cokewolds” of the men.

In medieval England there was not much for the discussion of equality in a marriage. It was standard for the woman to be subordinate to her husband because the woman was deemed the insignificant party. Though it may be true that this may not have been the case in all marriages, it was standard enough for Chaucer to question it in several of his tales. Critics say time and time again that Chaucer did take a great interest in the topic of marriage and it is evident that he challenges the typical treatment of the wife.

Chaucer... deals at some length with marriage relations, and one of his greatest creations, satirical but also sympathetic, is the much married Wife of Bath, who tyrannized over her successive husbands, and made their lives misery. His solution to the problem of a successful marriage is given at the beginning of The Franklin’s Tale where the knightly husband promises always to obey his wife “as any lover to his lady shall”.\textsuperscript{11}

Granted, Alisoun of Bath is a satirical woman, but it stands to say that Chaucer’s use of extremes clearly brought across his point as Bath consistently repeats her stand for women as she preaches of “sovereynetee” and not to be overlooked is the acceptable woman seen in The Miller’s Tale who will not be subjected to the husband’s commands.
Another example of Chaucer’s extremes appears in his creation of the woman equivalent to the medieval prototype. Griselda (*The Clerk’s Tale*) seems to exemplify in part the role of the woman in England at Chaucer’s time through her subordination and loyalty to her husband. But even her perfection as the subordinate wife figure is extreme and often brings the readers to hate her weakness in accepting such terrible sufferings her husband inflicted on her. She is ever obedient and subordinate to her husband even in the worse case scenario and instead of gaining the respect one may think she deserves after so much sorrow she has witnessed, Chaucer evokes a sense of spite towards her weakness. Although poets previous to Chaucer have used this wife figure (Boccaccio and Petrarch), none of them twist the tale into a questioning of Griselda’s humanness like Chaucer has, “But he finishes up with a cynical ending, recommending wives on no account to follow Griselda’s example.”\(^{12}\) While many poets applaud Griselda, Chaucer boos her and uses her as an example of what women should *not* be.

It is easy to look at Chaucer in modern times and accuse him of being an antifeminist, but this is simply untrue considering the status of women in the 1300’s, as previously seen, was so much different than it is now. Chaucer went to great lengths to create a woman that we would be proud of today, but that is not to say that Chaucer wrote for future audiences; it seems certain that he often wrote to please himself. He may have created the strong woman in a satirical manner such as is the case with Alison in *The Miller’s Tale*, but considering the society he was writing for, he did make a defense of women’s freedom to choose.
In the following chapters we will examine a great deal of negative criticism as well as positive support of Chaucer's women. Readers and critics alike must remember to applaud at his attempt of the futuristic woman and not hiss that he could not better predict the strength of women 500 years ahead of his time. We will see a wide range of critics who find fault with what Chaucer lacked, rather than what he gave. In addition, there are ample amounts of critics who applaud Chaucer and the glorious works he left behind to be praised.

1 Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, (Madison, University Press of Wisconsin, 1991), p. 282. Brewer studies the differences between men and women and their place in society in the Middle Ages. Men had social responsibilities, while women were socially invisible and had private lives. Patterson goes a step further to look at the Wife of Bath and the way in which she challenges her social position.

2 Jeffrey L. Singman and Will McLean, Daily Life in Chaucer’s England, (London, Greenwood Press, 1995) p. 24. Singman and McLean look at society during the time of Chaucer. They would most likely be considered sociologists for they find a great interest in the way the Canterbury Tales consisted of ordinary people and their lifestyles. Like the tales, these two concentrate on the ordinary people and times of the Middle Ages. They find the tales to be deeply rooted with an excessive amount of information solely on people’s daily lives. Their focus is specifically on the lifetime on Chaucer—1342-1400.

3 Derek Brewer, Chaucer in his Time (Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1963), pp. 73-75. Brewer tries to give a general understanding of Chaucer’s life and writings by looking at the time in which he lived and the way society moved. Brewer looks briefly at the ordinary life in order to give a general understanding of most of the characters of the tales. He then precedes to the higher order of society and focuses mainly on the court system since it was such an intricate part of Chaucer’s life.

4 All subsequent entries are taken from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987). The numbered entries represent the Fragment and the line number as noted in the text.

5 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992) p. 138. Pearsall takes a close look at Chaucer’s response to society in the treatment of women and notes that Chaucer was indeed unique in his creation of strong female characters. Such women at the time of Chaucer were unheard of and Pearsall adds that the notion of women gaining power may have even scared people (men in particular). For more, see Pearsall’s chapter “Chaucer and Women” pp. 135-143.


7 Larry D. Benson, The Riverside Chaucer. Benson finds Chaucer to be an experimental poet who often based his works on intellectual interests. Chaucer was affected by what his predecessors wrote, according to Benson, and this can be seen in most of Chaucer’s writings. Benson believes that Chaucer was influenced by the changes in lifestyles and beliefs in England and this comes up predominantly in the Tales.

8 Paul F. Baum, Chaucer: A Critical Appreciation, p. 212.
9 Singman, p. 24. The daily life of women is the subject of this particular section. Singman and McLean give a general account of what a typical woman’s life consisted of and how she was viewed in medieval society.
10 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, pp.230-232. The publication of The Canterbury Tale and the audience that received it is discussed in depth by Pearsall.
11 Derek Brewer, Chaucer in His Time, p. 75. Love and marriage was a common topic of Chaucer’s time, but according to Brewer, love was not necessarily associated with sex or marriage. Chaucer was unique until the nineteenth century in the length of which he writes about love and marriage. Unlike his comrades, Chaucer suggests the remedy to a successful marriage in The Franklin’s Tale where husband and wife promise each other equality and love in their marriage. For more details see pp. 75-76.
12 Derek Brewer, p. 75.
II. The Critics Speak

There is a plethora of information on Chaucer and his works and looking at it all can be overwhelming at best. But when the topic is broken down and a closer look is taken, the simplicity of it all becomes real. Critics take many stances as to who Chaucer is and what he stands for. Many will say that he is a feminist (Lee Patterson, Derek Pearsall, Robert Payne) while others will say he is a misogynist (Sheila Delany, Elaine Tuttle Hansen). It is hard to say what Chaucer thought and believed because much of his works go from one extreme to the next (The Wife of Bath and The Clerk’s Tale). But to say he was a fourteenth century feminist would be incorrect because the use of the word is much stricter today. In scrutinizing not one of Chaucer’s tales, but looking at Chaucer the man, looking at those who influenced him and looking at his works as a whole, it seems evident enough that Chaucer is intrigued by relationships between men and women and, if anything, he understands the sexes and supports the strength of their persons, women in particular.

In looking at Chaucer the man, many critics support the fact that he takes great interest in people and their relationships to one another. These intertwining relationships often come out in his writing when looking at The Canterbury Tales and the pilgrims. There is a great dichotomy between a number of the various pilgrims and that becomes apparent through the interruptions and the diversity of the tales. Chaucer takes great strides to duplicate the realness of the interaction between the characters and this could
only have been done through careful scrutiny and interest in people. The Marriage
Group,\(^1\) as they have been labeled, is yet another area in which it becomes obvious that
Chaucer enjoys the topic of men, women, marriage and general interactions. According
to Pearsall, "What is very clear is that he was preoccupied with women, and with their
role in their relationships with men, to a degree quite remarkable in his day, as compared,
for instance, with Gower, Langland and the *Gawain-poet*.\(^2\)

As Pearsall comments it becomes equally apparent that Chaucer is not only
enthralled with relationships between the sexes but the female sex in and of itself. This
interest does not seem to be strictly due to the writing of the *Tales* and his other works,
but spans beyond his writings. This interest is not only evident in his tales, but in his life
as well. It appears repeatedly that Chaucer was a friend to all women. He certainly stops
long enough to question the degrading status of women in his time for he asserts in a
number of his tales and works (*The Wife of Bath, Miller’s Tale, The Clerk’s Tale, Legend
of Good Women*) the strength that a woman can and should have. He also displays
through characters like the Alisoun of Bath, the triumphant, vocal woman. Such a
woman in Chaucer’s time was unthinkable, yet Chaucer chose to create this coming-of-
age woman. He certainly did not write to please an audience of men because that would
have received the opposite affect; this can only lead me to believe that Chaucer himself
believes in the admiration of women.

If one looks closely at Chaucer the man, to say he was a friend to all women
would be questionable since it is hard to overlook or ignore the supposition that so often
appears that he was accused of *raptus*. This word has meant abduction, but there has
been a great deal of speculation that raptus in this instance meant rape. However, no
charges were brought against him. To take it one step further, many critics have said its truth has never been tested and the rest is mostly speculation. It is reasonable for readers to wonder where Chaucer actually stands in respect to women, in his own life and in his writings, but Pearsall claims for certain:

The incident, though enigmatic and the focus of many questions, provokes some possibly pertinent speculation on Chaucer’s attitude to women. He was ever woman’s friend, says Gavin Douglas, who, though critical of Chaucer for having misrepresented Virgil in speaking ill of Aeneas for abandoning Dido, nevertheless excuses Chaucer on the grounds of his well-known (and, in Douglas’ view, probably excessively indulgent) sympathy for women.3

Due to lack of information what really happened is unknown except for that fact that Chaucer was charged with something. Regardless of any personal accusations (all of which must be put aside for lack of sufficient information) he seems to have gained great favor with the women of his time.

It is difficult to read a piece of work and not presume that what the narrator is saying is actually what the author is thinking particularly in The Canterbury Tales. We know that the narrator is Chaucer, but readers must separate Chaucer the poet from Chaucer the narrator. However, in reading an extensive amount of Chaucer’s work it is even more difficult not to assume that Chaucer did occasionally write for himself because character personalities seem to reappear in slightly varied traits (Alisoun of Bath and the Miller’s Alisoun, Dorigen and The Prioress).4 In addition, Chaucer had no reason to write in support of women since his audience certainly did not expect it and may have even rejected his liberalism. Two of the tales, The Wife of Bath and The Clerk’s Tale, go to great lengths to lecture in honor of women. So how can one say that bits of Chaucer’s
true identity did not slip past his pen and onto the page? Paul F. Baum argues that no person can hypothesize about Chaucer the man through his writings:

It is even more futile to select passages from his poetry which seem to reveal something of his thought and feeling as a person; it is tempting, but futile... There are few places in Chaucer's whole work where we can securely trust that he is speaking for himself; he was not a subjective poet; and even where we may think we have found something revealing we face the alternative possibility that the views were second-hand, or we recognize an undertone of irony. For the rest, he speaks for his characters as their attitudes or situations require.

It is true that often Chaucer speaks not for himself, but acts as the voice for his characters in order to tell a story. This is evident in The Clerk's Tale where the Clerk demonstrates the repeated patience of Griselda. Chaucer tells the horror and pain that Griselda experiences as the patient and obedient wife and he creates an agonizing story for his character. However, Chaucer also adds Lenvoy de Chaucer in which he warns women not to be like Griselda, "Ne dreed him nat; doth hem no reverence" (IV, 1201). He tells women emphatically and forthrightly to stand-up and be strong. It is hard to read the aside that comes after the tale and believe that Chaucer's person is not being revealed; after all, in Chaucer's day, Griselda was the kind of woman most men expected and demanded and given that the majority of Chaucer's audience was men, Lenvoy seems unnecessary. Even if there were women in the audience, would any of them have had the courage to retaliate against such a tale (unless she was a person of power such as the Queen)? Most women in Chaucer's day did not even stand-up to their husbands, much less a stranger. Essentially, the situation did not require Chaucer to be diplomatic for the sake of his audience which leads me to believe that in this instance (one of many to come) Chaucer, the man, was speaking.
So why then does Chaucer often resume to the writing that is typical for the Middle Ages as far as women are concerned? *Troilus and Criseyde* was considered one example of Chaucer’s misogynist attitude. Criseyde is, after all, portrayed as the faithless love, but according to Pearsall, “Alceste attempts a defence of Chaucer, arguing that he has in the past written things such as to draw people to the service and praise of love.” Writing as the situation requires may be the cause of such negativity toward women. Maybe Chaucer was trying to depict a true love story as he so often does throughout his works.

It is evident that Chaucer takes extreme interest in relationships as we see another test of faithfulness in *The Franklin’s Tale*. But in this tale, Chaucer shows the extensive fidelity of both husband and wife. In showing both sides (Dorigen and Arveragus) Chaucer’s sophistication of knowing and understanding both the sexes appears again. *Troilus and Criseyde* may show the unfaithfulness of Criseyde but Chaucer does give her the freedom and courage to make her own decisions without being restrained by male superiority. He also gives Criseyde the sensuality that we see in many of Chaucer’s triumphant women (*Alisoun of Bath* and *Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale*). Unfortunately, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, there have been many preoccupations with the woman’s unfaithfulness and the intention does appear too one sided. Even Queen Anne of Bohemia (Richard’s wife) was offended by the tale because it seemed to imply that women are typically unfaithful. She ordered Chaucer to write another story, hence *The Legend of Good Women*. Although he did not finish the legend, it did increase his popularity with the women.
"What Chaucer wrote in the legends was in fact, not quite what the Queen had ordered; but it was pro-women enough to serve as a model for other poets and to enhance his reputation as a friend of women, all without giving up the Rose".\textsuperscript{10}

To some, \textit{Troilus and Criseyde} may not have been honorable to women, but even while some insist \textit{Troilus and Criseyde} is complimentary of women, others argue otherwise. Elaine Tuttle Hansen is one critic who does not see Criseyde in a positive manner. She believes that Chaucer can not be seen as sympathetic towards women particularly for his creation of Criseyde:

Why not conclude, as other readers have done, that the representation of Criseyde as a woman trying her best to exert control in a world where no man can be trusted reveals the narrator’s (and/or the author’s) sympathy for women in general and for this victim of ideology in particular? One problem that such a reading elides returns us precisely to the point at which we began: the problem of Criseyde’s own ambiguity, which is not erased when we sketch in the fuller picture, as I have tried to do here, of her uncertainty in the face of other characters’ ambiguities.\textsuperscript{11}

Not only does Hansen find Criseyde’s ambiguities insulting, but she also notes Criseyde’s ignorance regarding Pandaras’ plan.\textsuperscript{12} Hansen views the tale ending with the restoration of typical roles as Chaucer’s acceptance of the misogynistic society.

Although \textit{Troilus and Criseyde} may lack outstandingly strong women, Chaucer seems to make up for it with the \textit{Legend}. As to whether or not he was really ordered by the Queen to write it is another story.\textsuperscript{13} One thing is certain; he was not ordered to write \textit{Lenvoy de Chaucer},\textsuperscript{14} or ordered to create Dorigen and the Alisouns. Chaucer writes those plausible women of his own accord.

Although all his stories and women do not invite a feminist reading, one must not only consider the time period and audience but those who wrote before Chaucer—his
teachers, if you will. Looking at several of Chaucer’s predecessors is a good example of true misogyny if one considers Theophrastus, St. Augustine, Jean de Meun and Homer, just to name a few. Theophrastus, for example, is credited with a book *On Marriage* in which he downgrades women particularly in marriage. The “woes of men” regarding women are played over and over again in his book as he states that the only reason men marry is to have a manager for the household and the better way to go is to have a slave who is more obedient than a wife.\(^{15}\) Chaucer seems to have a vast knowledge of Theophrastus and his work as is seen in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* when Alisoun applies what Theophrastus wrote to how her old husbands acted. Although Chaucer makes reference to Theophrastus’ work, he does not imitate the crassness which he uses towards women.

Another writer of Chaucer’s time who can not be overlooked is Jean de Meun and his work *Romance of the Rose*. Even in a time of male domination and suppression of women, the *Rose* was disturbing to the audience, “I’ll not document the vast evidence of upset over the *Rose*; suffice it to note that the whole *querelle* evinces high-level agitation over the *Rose*’s representation of women.”\(^{16}\) Chaucer is often criticized for translating such a misogynistic work, but he should not be blamed for the intolerant words against women, for it was de Meun’s words after all. The tale led to a great deal of confrontation for Chaucer, the Queen being one of the persons who specifically called for another work (after *Troilus and Criseyde*) in which women are only portrayed as good. It is Chaucer who accuses himself of misogyny in the Prologue of the *Legend of Good Women* and answers himself regarding such charges:

I should like to remind Chaucerians that the feminist connection was made by the author himself. It is most unlikely, of course,
that the Prologue, in which the God of Love accuses the poet of misogyny before a court of ladies, was intended to be taken literally; but surely the fictional charges and rebuttals are clues dropped by the author. Picked up and followed, they lead to fourteenth-century controversies over women and over the Romance de la Rose, controversies which in turn help us to understand the meaning of Chaucer’s poem.\textsuperscript{17}

It becomes clear that if Chaucer truly meant ill will towards women he would not admit his faults nor would he rebut such charges in his own prologue. Although the translations of works that have been labeled antifeminist put Chaucer in a difficult position of defense, this is not enough to qualify him as a poet who found great joy in defamation of women. In fact, Chaucer often takes the words of his mentors and inverts them so they are favorable to women. The Wife of Bath’s Prologue is one example in which Chaucer counters de Meun and St. Paul. According to Miller, Chaucer used la Vieille as an outline for Bath in which her great wisdom is exemplified and she preaches of love to “wise wyves” (165). However, the vengeance towards men is greatly lessened in Chaucer’s tale.\textsuperscript{18}

Another example of how Chaucer does not blindly accept what the predominant writers of his time had to say is through the use of contradictions in his characters’ speeches. In his writings, St. Paul stresses the importance of virginity essentially putting it above marriage. St. Paul and his ideas are denounced by Alisoun of Bath when she asks, “That hye God defended mariag/ By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me./ Or where comanded he virginitee?” (III, 60-62). Bath refers to scripture when she mentions that St. Paul is contradicting God since it was He who said to be fruitful and multiply. This is Chaucer’s opportunity to show his individuality and ideas regarding other authors and their ideas. Chaucer takes these opportunities and we often find him defending the
status of women rather than denigrating them. This is not to say that Chaucer was the lone poet who spoke in praise of women because he was not.

Unlike the poets previous to Chaucer who often wrote unfavorably of women, there are the unique few that stand out as friends of women. Giovanni Boccaccio is one of these poets who not only writes positively about women, but one who is also a great influence on Chaucer. Christine de Pisan is one woman writer who imitates Boccaccio’s skepticism of the times. Since Christine challenged every misogynist concept of her time, her imitation of Boccaccio is quite complimentary. Sheila Delany examines the influence of Boccaccio over Christine and the various reasons Christine often chose to borrow from his works:

Boccaccio too undertook to rewrite woman better, if not entirely good, and to redress the imbalance produced by misogynistic literature. Boccaccio is for the education of women and against involuntary nunhood, condemning the latter as an especially vicious form of oppression. He denounces the low self-esteem of women who consider themselves fit for nothing but motherhood. Although he does include evil or ambiguous characters in his collection, Boccaccio is as positive as possible toward Eve and Medusa, cleans up the image of Dido and exposes the presumptuous Pope Joan as a purely legendary figure.

While Chaucer is occasionally passive toward the tradition of portrayed women, Boccaccio’s writings did have a great affect on him for we see traces of Boccaccio’s Teteseida in Chaucer’s Anelida and Arcite, The Parliament of Fowls, Troilus and Criseyde and The Knight’s Tale. While the ideas of Boccaccio’s works seems to catch the attention of Chaucer, so too does it seem to encourage him in his praise of women for The Canterbury Tales (which also came after Chaucer’s discovery of Boccaccio) creates a number of liberated women whose image does not coincide with the tradition.
It is true to say that Chaucer does not write in constant praise of women, but this was not unnatural. The fact that he ever considered giving power and voice to women in his tales during his era is more unheard of. Reverting back to the traditional woman was a likely move for Chaucer. He may deeply believe in the independence of women and wanted to make a difference, but one must remember how limited he was in his time: “Elsewhere, Chaucer responds with a full measure of sympathy to women betrayed, victimized or abandoned. The plight of Dido calls forth some of his most moving writing, and there is something unusually earnest about his sympathy for women, in an age when cynicism towards women, open or covert, was the rule”. 22

Extensive cynicism towards women is certainly an issue Chaucer dealt with in his time whether he felt the same way or not. It is clear that Chaucer did not feel the same hatred that was felt by other men (poets or otherwise) or he would have used his poetry as a means to exemplify the common base he shared with so many of his audience members. But, instead, Chaucer uses his poetry quite often to write in honor of women and to encourage women to establish the bonds with one another to stand against such aversion. Chaucer is not a feminist, nor did he pave the way for women’s liberation, but I will say that he did light the match (maybe not even light the match, simply took the match out of the box). However, I will argue against the notion that Chaucer is a misogynist, because there is ample evidence to prove otherwise. Elaine Tuttle Hansen is one critic who charges Chaucer as an antifeminist. In one passage Hansen concentrates on the Wife of Bath and the fact that the Wife can not be truly feminine due to her male authorship: “It is an apparently paradoxical but finally explicable and revealing fact that the one woman in the Canterbury Tales who is so often viewed, for good or bad, as an autonomous being

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is the one from whose mouth comes the reminder that "she," like very female character in the male-authored text, never existed at all.\textsuperscript{23}

It is ironic that instead of applauding Chaucer for creating a character who would rebel against the fact that she "never existed," Hansen denotes her character and claims the Wife to be a reminder that women in Chaucer's eyes are subservient. The creation of the Wife seems to be an indication to me that Chaucer is admitting and speaking out against such treatment of women rather than promoting and accepting this as an ideal. Alisoun is also unique in the way that she speaks out so boldly and vibrantly unlike any of the other women in the tales. Another important aspect in the Wife of Bath is the differences in her marriages. It is her with fifth husband Janekyn who eventually forms the kind of marriage Chaucer discusses again in \textit{The Franklin's Tale}. The story of their marriage ends with Alisoun telling the audience of the equality they shared; he gave her run of the land and let her do as she wished and she was a good wife to him, "And also trewe, and so was he to me" (825).

There are negative aspects in Alisoun of Bath that will appear in later chapters and Hansen uses her weaknesses to exploit Chaucer's work instead of looking at a large variety of the positive aspects of Chaucer's characters and the strides he took in creating these revolutionary women. And in some instances, Chaucer must consider his primary goal and lay aside his defense of women. Pearsall is one critic who understands the task before Chaucer and although Chaucer may not submit to the degrading treatment of woman, he sometimes has to put his feminism aside, but it is not his ideal:

Yet, though he shows himself thoroughly dissatisfied with images of women in their traditionally submissive roles, as throughout \textit{The Legend of Good Women}, Chaucer is still unhappy about the alternatives . . . Sometimes the woman must be eliminated or
deliberately reduced to a cipher, as are Emily in the Knight’s Tale and Constance in the Man of Law’s Tale, so that Chaucer can work out his narrative without the troublesome distraction of woman as ‘something other’ than the instrument of his purpose.24

This is yet another reason why it is clear that Chaucer could not be considered a feminist writer because he does not give up everything to write for the sake of women. He still thinks about the Tales as a whole and it seems probable that the audience that will receive it comes to mind often and he would not want to make it too overwhelming for them. But Chaucer did show concern for women and their status in life by his creations that most likely left many of his male dominated audience members stunned.

“No longer merely the protagonist of a fictive narration, the female both controls her own verbal world and the tale-telling game itself. And in this she becomes a model for the poet.”25 This much is obviously true. The Wife of Bath certainly owns her verbal world and she has even engaged in the tale-telling of the pilgrims. Alisoun in The Miller’s Tale also becomes a woman who inevitably controls her own world through the jests that are played on the various male characters. But Chaucer has Alisoun walk away unscathed as she laughs at the misfortune of the men.

While in some tales Chaucer shows the women victorious, in others he has them subordinate (The Knights Tale) and still in other tales he shows the equality of men and women in relationships, particularly in marriage (Franklin’s Tale). Chaucer does not give up all the ideas of women’s status since the denigration was certainly around him, but he certainly shows his displeasure with the treatment of women. It appears remarkable that a man during an era of degradation of women would take interest to write about the equality and partnership that men and women should share. And Chaucer certainly seemed to lead the way because on Valentine’s Day, 1401, only a year after his death, the
"Cour Amoureuse" was founded. The group was to promote servitude and honor to
women through literature. Although the group could not be taken too seriously (since
many of the members were defenders of Roman) it was encouraging to see Chaucer had
indeed begun what one might consider a small crusade. Chaucer's writings gave other
men an admiration for his plight:

Douglas thus joined the band of male comrades always ready to
compliment Chaucer on his sympathetic portrayal of women.
Chaucer made strenuous efforts to engage this sympathy and did
much to deserve the admiration. Yet there are noticeable limitations
to his sympathetic understanding of women, limitations imposed by
his sex and by the age in which he lived.

The age did play a role in how Chaucer would write if he wanted his works to be popular
and this may have been problematic. He was not powerful enough to start a full-fledge
revolution for women and maybe he had no intention of even paying anymore than lip
service. While he may have opened a few minds and have had sympathy toward the ill
treatment of women, he did not set out to lead the women’s rights movement. But as
they say, Rome wasn’t built in a day. Unfortunately, the time period is so often
forgotten, so too are the types of poets that wrote before Chaucer who were much more
extreme against women than Chaucer could ever be:

Indeed, each poet takes the trouble to defend himself against the
charge of misogyny: Homer by having Agamemnon utter the
"really" misogynistic sentiments and be refuted; Chaucer by having
his accuser shown up by a female companion.

Delany speaks before she considers the time period Chaucer and Homer wrote in—a
period where women were naturally subordinate to men and in which it was expected that
women would be subservient to the men. For either poet to feel they must defend
themselves in a culture where misogyny is readily accepted is simply absurd. As
discussed previously, the majority of writers wrote adversely of women and very little
was said about it. Unfortunately, Chaucer is lumped with the narrow-minded writers of
his time and receives the brunt of criticism for his predecessors’ mistakes. However,
Chaucer does not wrong women the way many authors do. On the contrary, he showed a
new, respectable approach to the topic of women and not only their relations to the rest of
the world, but particularly their relations to men and love.

Chaucer shows an understanding of the sexes—not only women, but men as well.
Chaucer questions the male domination of women in his works and he gives voice to
their oppression, but he does not stop there. He also shows the man’s side. The tales is a
perfect example of this. While giving women a new standard to live up to, he also shows
the men and their confusion to this new voice of reason that is to come. At first there is a
great deal of mockery from the men as we see from the Friar at the end of The Wife of
Bath’s Prologue, “The Frere lough, whan he hadde herd al this” (829). It is Harry Bailey
who steps in and tells the Friar to let her go on with her tale. Later we see a mild change
in some of the men as they take into consideration the words of Alisoun. The Friar
speaks up again in a rather complimenting way, “Ye han seyd muche thyng right wel, I
seye” (1273). The Friar may simply be patronizing her with this remark because he does
go on to say, “But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,/ Us nedeth nat to spoken but of
game” (1274-75). This could appear rather condescending on the Friar’s part since he
says that she is of no authority and makes it appear that her words are taken lightly since
it is “just a game.” However, Chaucer should not be faulted for the words of the Friar
since his character was to appear as closed minded and chauvinistic. Chaucer does have
to keep with the persona he intended for the characters and while they might not be in support of the woman, they are part of the story. Catherine Cox says:

Chaucer, then while no “feminist” himself, exposes his texts’ relationship to the cultural, ideological orthodoxy out of which they arise. His own position seems to resist the extremism of, say, Jerome or Walter Map, but his orthodoxy often operates covertly, leading readers to proclaim him a protofeminist even as he exhibits compliant participation in a misogynistic literary culture.30

Although Chaucer’s characters may be offensive to readers, due to some of their ideologies, Chaucer’s talents still emerge since he creates fictive people that could easily represent the real thing. Although the Friar could be considered one of Chaucer’s anti-feminist characters, he does not bluntly speak out against her tale nor do any of the other men in the company. If Chaucer was truly a misogynist, he would have utilized his male characters to ridicule women. Instead, Chaucer leaves the audience with the impression that the fellow pilgrims are thinking about the words of Alisoun of Bath.

Earlier in The Miller’s Tale, it is much the same way; the men do not get angry with the woman. Alisoun, participates in making her husband look like a “cuckhold” and she laughs whole heartedly at all the pain the other men endure (mostly on account of her) and none of the pilgrims comment or criticize the fact that she walks away unharmed. “He treats their relationships as a problem area. He writes of the suffering caused to both sexes in their involvement with each other, of unrequited love, of unhappy marriages, of power struggles.”31

It becomes apparent that Chaucer does not favor one sex over the other. While The Miller’s Tale depicts one of the sexes as unfortunate and the other as triumphant, Chaucer shows the highs and lows of both sexes throughout the Marriage Group. Many
critics take great interest in this collection of tales beginning with *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and ending with *The Franklin’s Tale.*\(^{32}\) This group of tales is unrelated to any of the other tales in that Chaucer keys into the various types of marriages between men and women. According to Kittredge, Chaucer supplies the audience with the wife who dominates her husband (*Wife of Bath*), the husband who dominates his wife (*Clerk’s Tale*), the young wife who fools her husband (*Merchant’s Tale*) and the chaste wife who stirs up strife (*Squire’s Tale*).\(^{33}\) However, the final tale of the Marriage Group is the opportunity for Chaucer to establish the prototype of a loving, equal marriage built on trust and respect. *The Franklin’s Tale* is unlike the other tales of the Marriage Group and unlike the Miller’s Alisoun, Dorigen demonstrates the extensive love a wife has for her husband.

Through all the time that passes without Arveragus and all the “pleyen” she did with her friends, she never drifted from her commitment to her husband. And when Arveragus returns, their love continues where it left off. Despite her extensive love for her husband, when Aurelius reminds her of the promise she made to him once he cleared the rocks away, she knows she must keep her word. Chaucer depicts her misery not only at making such a foolish promise, but at the idea she must either break her word or her husband’s heart, “She wepeth, wailleth, al a day or two” (V, 1348). But Chaucer does not show only the woman’s side in this tale. Once Dorigen tells Arveragus of her misfortune, we see his deeply troubled heart, but he tells her he knows what they must do despite their commitment to one another:

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Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!
For God so wisly have mercy upon me,
I hadde wel leve ye stikke for to be
For verray love which that I to yow have,
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But if ye shoulde youre trouthe kepe and save. (1474-1477)

Chaucer shows not only the woman's extensive love and faithfulness, but he shows the reciprocity from the man as well. By capturing both Dorigen and Arveragus' roller coaster of emotions through their ordeal, Chaucer demonstrates his knowledge of the male and female essence. Through the Marriage Group, Chaucer also offers the dynamics of different relationships, but unlike the fabliaux where there tends to be a winner and a loser, the *Franklin's Tale* establishes the equality that many of the tales lack:

We need not hesitate, therefore, to accept the solution which the Franklin offers as that which Geoffrey Chaucer the man accepted for his own part. Certainly it is a solution that does him infinite credit. A better has never been devised or imagined.\(^{34}\)

Chaucer continues through his tales to show the power of men and women not only independent of one another but also in conjunction with one another. *The Canterbury Tales* is proof enough that Chaucer was taken by the relationships of men and women and his writings display the reality of how these interactions actually occur specifically in his time. Although he does not continuously show the dominant woman, he also does not exemplify the dominant man either. He favors equality not only in marriage, but in relationships as well. A feminist Chaucer is not, nor can he be categorized as a misogynist:

Smiling at the extremists, Chaucer seems to decline membership in any company. Just as he protests he is not of the party of either the flower of the leaf (71-78), so he maintains his independence of both the saints of Cupid and the disciples of Reason, of both the feminists and the misogynists. He does so politely.\(^{35}\)
The intensity of criticism towards Chaucer, whether is be good or bad, is, as we have seen, extensive. Although there are a great many who believe that Chaucer was in no way a friend of women, there are equally as many who would prove otherwise. But one thing is certain; in comparison to many of the other writers of his time, Chaucer was very generous in his credit toward woman and he shows not only an interest in men and women, but how the two interact with one another. Chaucer’s writings demonstrate how well he understood the sexes and the genuineness of their relationships is seen repeatedly in the Tales.

Next we will look at The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and see the way in which Chaucer created her to be a woman unlike most others of his time. Alisoun of Bath is certainly the most outspoken and vibrant of all the women in his tales and I believe that Chaucer creates her to exemplify the strength that the woman of his time and even now can demonstrate. Chaucer uses the Wife’s comparisons of her marriages to show the difference in the sexes and essentially to epitomize the ideal comradary that should be between man and woman and where the Wife fails.

The stage seems set for the emergence of a new woman, one who seeks power only in order to love truly, from a position of independence, one who is not afraid to be weak. Unfortunately, the stage collapses, or at least Chaucer allows it to deconstruct.1

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1 There has been a great deal of research and speculation as to whether Chaucer purposely intended for the group of tales (Wife of Bath, Merchant, Clerk’s, Squire’s, Franklin’s) to be linked together by the common topic of marriage or if it just appears that way. According to Vance Ramsey the neatness of the group and the uniqueness like those of no others has made for a great deal of inquiry by researchers such as Kittredge, Hammond and other. Vance Ramsey, “Modes of Irony in the Canterbury Tales,” in Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 361. Additional research

2 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 138. Pearsall discusses in detail the way in which Chaucer viewed women and their place in society in the Middle Ages. Pearsall insists that Chaucer was a friend to all women and uses examples from his writings to support his point. The Book of the Duchess, Criseyde, The Wife of Bath and The Legend of Good Women are just a few works that Pearsall sees to demonstrate that Chaucer understood and sympathized with women. For more see pp. 135-143.

3 In 1380 Cecilia Champagne accused Chaucer of rape, but the exact implication of the word is unsure. “That Chaucer was guilty of something is clear from the care he took to secure immunity from prosecution but it need not have been rape.” For extensive detail of the charges brought against Chaucer see Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 138.

4 This goes back to the long debated question of Chaucer the man compared to Chaucer the poet. Throughout the tales the narrative is believed to be Chaucer the poet, but a fine line seems to be drawn when discussing the notion of whose beliefs are really coming alive on the page; is it the fictive Chaucer simply telling a tale or is it the flesh and blood man who believes in what he is writing?


6 The original tale of Griselda is told by Giovanni Boccaccio in Decameron. Much like The Canterbury Tales, the Decameron is told for entertainment when ten Florentines fled from a country villa to escape the plague. The final story is the tale of Griselda. The tale is retold by Petrarch in Latin, but unlike Boccaccio’s version, Petrarch’s lacks a narrator. In addition, a major change on Petrarch’s part was that Griselda was not used as an example of the obedient wife, but rather to teach a religious moral. Petrarch uses Griselda’s sufferings, “to show people how to endure the trials that God sent them. However, he obliquely referred to Boccaccio’s point when he specifically disavowed the story as a model for wives, saying that the story was not inteded to encourage contemporary married women to imitate Griselda’s patience” (Bronfman, 16).

Chaucer’s version of Griselda seems to most closely follow Petrarch’s tale. For more see Judith Bronfman, Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated, (London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994).

7 This assertion reverts back to the man being in charge of the woman and the notion of the woman’s ability to judge as discussed in Chapter I. Lee Patterson also discusses the woman as being “invisible” in Chaucer and the Subject of History.

8 The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 151. Chaucer has been accused of misogyny through characters such as Criseyde who is unfaithful to Troilus. Many critics use this as an example that Chaucer uses her character as a metaphor warning men not to trust women. Pearsall defends Chaucer from any wrong doings in saying that in this particular tale, Chaucer was writing, “for the praise of love.” Alceste refers to Queen Alceste from the Prologue to The Legend of Good Women. In the Prologue, “Alceste tells the God of Love to be generous and merciful to Chaucer, as all lords should be to their subjects.” See Pearsall p. 109 for more details.

9 Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, ed. Nevill Coghill, (Penguin Books, London, 1951), pp. xi-xvii. A detailed account of Chaucer’s works specifically the retraction that was requested by Queen Anne in regards to Troilus and Criseyde. Coghill asserts that the Queen was offended by what has been called Chaucer’s “most poignant love story” (xv) due to the author’s implications that women can not be as faithful as men can.


Ames looks at the omissions of characters’ backgrounds in the Legend and questions if Chaucer was being facetious in “calling the perpetrators good women.” Ames believes that more evidence is needed than omission especially if he was, in fact, ordered by the Queen to write in honor of women, he would have been foolish to be so blatant.

11 Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), p. 168. Hansen finds numerous problems with the character of Criseyde and the weaknesses she emits. Criseyde is still formed by male authorship and Hansen believes she is too problematic to be applauded for any feminine triumph.

12 For more on Criseyde’s ignorance regarding Pandaras’ plan see Hansen, pp. 168-169.
13 M.C.E. Shaner, “Introduction to The Legend of Good Women”, in Riverside Chaucer ed. Larry D. Benson, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), p. 587. Shaner sees Chaucer’s work with the Legend as his work at the prime of his life. Shaner questions the notion that Chaucer wrote the tale with great reluctance and simply on order of the Queen. “Yet, while there is some evidence (the dedication to the queen in the Prologue) that Chaucer did write at the queen’s request, there can be no certainty that the request was as restricted or specific as Alceste’s command in the Prologue.” Regardless, it is apparent that Chaucer did become bored with the work and abandoned it, unfinished.

14 “Envoy” means letter and there are two Envoy de Chaucer written: Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan and Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton. The authenticity of The Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan has never been questioned while the other has been seriously questioned. For a more detailed account on the two Envoy’s see Larry D. Benson, The Riverside Chaucer, pp. 1086-1087.


16 Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 67. Dinshaw examines the reasons behind Chaucer’s translations of the Rose and Troilus and Criseyde given the extensive unrest of readers regarding the two works. Chaucer’s response to all the criticism over these works seems to be answered in what Dinshaw refers to as the “dream visions.” She examines how the narrator defends himself through the dreams in various works as a means of avoiding any confrontation. For more regarding the dream visions see pp. 67-72.

17 Ruth M. Ames “The Feminist Connections of Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women,” p. 57. Although Ames does not believe Chaucer is a feminist, she defends him against misogyny. She discusses the repercussions Chaucer endured following his work with the Rose and Troilus and Criseyde and the orders from the Queen that he received shortly after. Although Chaucer may not have taken on this task with great enthusiasm as he began the Legend, Ames uses extensive proof to show that the author meant no harm or negativity towards women in his translation of either works.

18 Robert P. Miller, Chaucer. Sources and Backgrounds, p. 468. Miller also gives other examples in which the motif of “wise wyves” appears in the Friar’s Prologue, 1271-77 and General Prologue, 475-76.

19 Christine de Pisan was the first professional female author (poet and philosopher) from France during the Middle Ages. Since women were not educated during her time, she father educated her. Many of her works urged women to be allowed to participate more within society. She also argued against the way women were portrayed in literature. For more see Ruth M. Ames, “The Feminists Connections.”

20 Sheila Delany “Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts” in Chaucer in the Eighties, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, (Syracuse, Syracuse, University Press, 1986), p. 88. Delany examines the rewriting of the image of women and the various authors and their influences (particularly Christine de Pisan) on the changes of women in literature.

21 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 118. Pearsall claims that whether Chaucer intended to imitate Boccaccio so much is unknown, but Chaucer did bring back copies of Boccaccio’s work after his second trip to Italy in 1378 and the works seem to be on Chaucer’s literary subconscious.

22 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 139.

23 Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1992), p. 35. While Bath is considered a victorious character for her exuberant voice and personality, Hansen considers her a reminder of male superiority and dominance because she so often points out that she never existed. Hansen views Bath as a superficial character from a male author. For a more detailed account see pp. 26-57.

24 The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 139.

25 Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) p. 286. Patterson examines Chaucer’s use of women throughout the tales and takes a particular interest in Alisoun of Bath and Alisoun of Miller.

26 Ruth M. Ames, “The Feminists Connections,” p. 60. Christine de Pisan had requested support against the Romance of the Rose. She wanted to defend the reputation of women. A group of men later founded “Cour Amoureuse” also in gratitude of women. Both groups reviewed current literature and awarded prizes for the works that were most appreciative of women and they greatly discouraged and spoke against those works that demoralized women.

27 Ames suggests that the male group was considered as mainly tongue and cheek for the benefit of women. They could not be taken seriously since so many of the men were avid defenders of the Roman. “The most
specific message we get from these societies is the general one we already had from the Legend, namely that uncritical praise of women was fashionable and that lip-service was to be paid to the female reader” (60).


39 Catherine S. Cox, Gender and Language in Chaucer, (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 95. Cox agrees that although Chaucer may not have been a misogynist, he did succumb to the times and he certainly did not show any extensive resistance in the degradation of women. She does, however, see Chaucer’s concern with relativity and subordination though he does little to make a distinctive change. Chaucer sees gender as an obstacle, but his ballads do little to resolve the complications, which inevitably leaves his ballads to be problematic in the eyes of Cox.

31 Priscilla Martin, Chaucer’s Women (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1990) p. xii.

32 According to Kittredge none of the tales that follow the Franklin’s is linked in any way to the five previous tales. He also sees a connectedness through those five tales unlike any other and believes it was Chaucer’s intent to string the tales together to show the diversity in marriage. It is also believed that Chaucer took this opportunity to teach the true value of what a marriage should be and through The Franklin’s Tale, gave a prototype for the pilgrims to follow. For a more extensive reading on the subject see G. L. Kittredge, “Chaucer’s discussion of Marriage” pp. 8-30.

33 “Chaucer’s discussion of Marriage” p. 23.

34 Kittredge finds the marriage of Dorien and Arveragus to be a great success of Chaucer’s creation. Since Chaucer ends with this tale, Kittredge feels that Chaucer is speaking his mind and laying the groundwork for what many should find to be an amicable and ideal marriage that should be imitated more often.

35 Ruth M. Ames, “The Feminists Connections”, p. 72. Ames looks at the criticism Chaucer endured for the translation of the Rose and then at his other works specifically the Legend. Although she agrees with many critics that Chaucer was not pro-women enough to be considered a feminist, she also does think that he is a misogynist.

36 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 259.
III. A Close Look at the Wife of Bath

Applauded for his captivating tales, Chaucer also used his insight into people to create some of the most outstanding and realistic characters. One of those characters that captivated audiences was Alisoun, the Wife of Bath. The complexity of the Wife of Bath probably caught most audiences of Chaucer’s time off guard with her domineering ways and controlling voice. Alisoun sets the stage for the strong woman and makes it clear that the days of the subservient woman will slowly diminish. Chaucer’s creation of the Wife of Bath was his opportunity to do what he wanted and still please audience members. The many faceted Alisoun of Bath shows unusual strength in her voice as she seeks her own sexual satisfaction. Her exchanges with the fellow pilgrims (specifically the Clerk) and her relationships with her husbands (specifically Jankyn) had an alluring affect on the audience and irrevocably became one of Chaucer’s best creations.

The Wife of Bath is one of Chaucer’s first dominant women as he describes her in the General Prologue, “In al the parisse she wif ne was ther noon/ That to the offrynge before hire sholde goon;” (I, 449-450). Chaucer makes it clear that Alisoun is not a woman to be dealt with lightly nor is she a woman to cross. This is the first glimpse of Alisoun of Bath and for Chaucer it becomes evident that he is just warming up. Unlike the other women of Chaucer’s tales, Alisoun is not a beautiful, independent woman of wealth; quite the opposite, Chaucer says of her, “Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe” (458). It also becomes known that she always has a husband and it is not until her
fourth husband that she gains any independence from them; not to be overlooked is the fact that all her money has come from her deceased husbands:

But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
But it were for my profit and myn ese? (III, 211-214)

But Chaucer takes this unique woman and grants her another gift that can not match beauty or wealth and that is feminine strength:

The Wife of Bath is the beneficiary of a similar imaginative generosity on Chaucer’s part: the attempt here is to make a space in fiction not for an independent-minded and attractive woman but for an independent-minded and unattractive one, indeed one who is constructed entirely out of archetypal male hostility and fear. It is hostility and fear, however, that seem to triumph at last over the generous notion that women might be as fully human as men.¹

The Wife of Bath seems to be Chaucer’s chance to step out of the conformity of society and offer an emergence of a new woman; one that is not the paragon of gentility, but one that will speak out in dissatisfaction to the confines that women have endured thus far. It is evident that even within the tales the Wife’s complacent demeanor seems to take her fellow pilgrims off guard because they are not accustomed to the emergence of the strong and vocal woman. Chaucer does not fool himself that this character is going to be readily accepted by audience members and going to become the prototype for every woman. Chaucer realized that he was taking a chance in creating a woman unlike any that have been created by his predecessors. England at Chaucer’s time, as we have previously seen, was very comfortable with the way life and attitudes had been for so long and many were not ready for change: “A presence something like Alisoun of Bath’s must have loomed menacingly on the late medieval scene, both needed for the new economy and feared for her propensity to dispense with conventions.”²
Although England was changing and moving with the times, most people were not ready for the emergence of the independent, strong-willed woman that Alisoun of Bath represents and resistance to this new being was common. Chaucer does not ignore the attitudes that are to come in response to his new ideal, in fact, he is prepared for them and depicts them as such at the end of Alisoun’s prologue, “The Frere lough, whan he hadde herd al this” (829). The Friar is just one example of how many would receive the Wife of Bath, but then Chaucer counters the narrow-mindedness of the Friar with words from the Summoner chastising the Friar’s words, “A frere wol entremette hym everemo” (834). Chaucer is prepared for the various reactions that will come in the unveiling of Alisoun.

The basis of society’s beliefs about women and their place in the world comes to a halt when Chaucer takes the stage. The host, Harry Bailey, originally designed the tale telling of the pilgrims, in which each of the pilgrims would tell two tales on the way to the shrine and two on the way home. The order of the tales was to follow the accepted hierarchy; thus the Knight started the stories. A man constructed the game and the rules followed what he deemed appropriate and the order was conventionally accepted. But when Alisoun takes the stage she adapts the rules to her own needs and plays by her own will. This was no mistake on Chaucer’s part. The exchanges between the pilgrims show how often Alisoun is refuted for what she is speaking, but Alisoun does not let this stop her. In addition, we often see the pilgrims taking sides and arguing about what Alisoun is discussing. The Friar laughs at the end of Alisoun’s prologue and the Summoner gets angered by the Friars words:

“What spekestow of preambulacioun?
What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit doun!
Thou lettest oure disport in this manere.”
“Ye, woltow so, sire Somonour?” quod the Frere;
“Now, by my feith I shal, er that I go,
Telle of a somonour swich a tale or two
That alle the folk sal laughen in this place.” (837-843).

Not only does Alisoun wreak havoc on the status of the hierarchy, but her strength of voice has a way of dividing the pilgrims in terms of their beliefs. It appears metaphorical that Chaucer uses something so simple as a game of tales to represent society and when the Wife steps in, the structure begins to crack and what is standard is disrupted:

Simply by discoursing, the Wife threatens to topple an entire structure of assumptions, beginning with the rules of the game. Established by males, the rules of the tale-telling game convey hierarchy, patriarchal authority, and closure. The Wife of Bath is profoundly in default of these rules.3

Unlike any of the other pilgrims, her prologue is extensive and personal. Within it, she questions the man’s place in society and converts the woman’s place to the uppermost importance. She questions authority, misquotes scripture and lacks respect for those of status and she has no qualms doing any of it. Unlike the other pilgrims, she will not let society dictate her place in life and she lives according to her rules. Then she turns to her tale and creates a fairyland in which the woman dominates once again. Compared to what was typical of the times, the Wife’s tale of the supreme woman is fairytale, but Alisoun is there to promote the “new world.” Chaucer makes this character extreme in her actions, her voice, her words, her beliefs—right down to the clothes on her back as we see in the General Prologue: “Hir coveshiefs ful fyne were of ground;/ I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound” (I, 453-454). The essence of Alisoun is very much
exaggerated, but this seems to be Chaucer’s way of catching everyone’s full attention, for
she is certainly not a woman to be overlooked or easily forgotten.

Her impulses are to act, to talk, to reason, to control, and to spend herself; her society’s ideals and many of its institutions urge her to forebear action, to be silent, to consent, to submit, and to withhold herself. The response she makes to this dilemma does not mark Alisoun as an ideal of feminism, but as a case in point, an apologist exposing the follies of her era, proud of a life which has achieved some success, gratification, and self acceptance in the face of cruel constraints. ²

When those around her try to silence her, she comes back at them full force, not allowing her strength of voice to be diminished. Alisoun seeks domination and power in relationships and does not strive for equality as we see in her marriages:

I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe
To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre.
They were ful glad when I spak to hem faire,
For God it woot, I chidde him spitously. (III, 219-223)

Her need to dominate is just one reason why she does not make a feminine stance, but her character is not completely lost. Though she can not stand as a feminine icon, it seems that Chaucer did not intend for her to be one; he simply used her to make society take note of what was wrong with its ideals. Seeing so many qualities that men demonstrate coming out in a woman, seems to be Chaucer’s way of satirizing the male population and their faults. The creation of Alisoun shows not only the strength that was lacking in so many women of Chaucer’s time, but the insights and emotions that were so often suppressed in woman of the Middle Ages. Chaucer had free range in the creation of Alisoun and he took every inch of it in the making of such a vibrant character. Her little quirks (misquoting “authoritee,” long winded speeches) become targets for many critics
(Hansen), but for many audience members, her personality flaws make her more real and more likeable.

The Wife of Bath, in fact, would seem to be Chaucer’s favorite character, and the reasons for this become clearer and clearer. . . . As Robert A Pratt has put it in his analysis of Chaucer’s evolving idea of the wife, from her early characterization as teller of “Shipman’s Tale” to her fully fleshed-out form as we know it now, “She appears to have interested Chaucer more, to have stimulated his imagination and creative power more fully and over a longer period, than any other of his characters.”5

The time and space that Chaucer gives to the Wife of Bath is another indication of the enjoyment he derived from her creation. Nowhere else in the General Prologue is any other character given such a detailed description of his/her attire, nature or the way he/she is received by others. With the Wife of Bath, Chaucer does all these things, in addition to allowing her 856 lines of prologue. Alisoun also remains one of the few characters (with exception to the Host) who were allowed a generous amount of lines for dialogue exchange between fellow pilgrims. To say that she is an excessive and exaggerated character may be true, but this only exemplifies Chaucer’s infatuation with her. It is without a doubt that Chaucer used the Wife of Bath to step out of his patriarchal society and make something more of women. The strength of Alisoun’s voice is the first aspect that adds originality and fervor to her person.

Women have always been portrayed for their “gift of gab” and Alisoun is certainly no exception to the rule—if anything, she goes beyond the nature realm of gab. Once she is given the stage, there is no stopping her. From her mouth flows an endless sea of knowledge (even if she does tend to misquote) and opinions:

Of alle men yblessed moot he be, 
The wise astrologien, Daun Ptholome, 
That seith this proverbe in his Almageste:
"Of alle men his wysdom is the hyeste
That reketh nevere who hath the world in
honde." (323-327)

She covers a wide variety of topics trying to keep up with her racing mind and now that
she has the opportunity to speak, she does not want to miss a thing. This is one aspect of
the Wife of Bath that Chaucer has captured that makes her character so genuine: "The
Canterbury Tales, of course, with the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner brings us in passing
some of the most famous talkers in all of literature."6

Chaucer does not leave her to talk about the ordinary; he gives her free
reign to discuss the various topics that interest her, although many of the subjects she
chooses are not those that are typically discussed. Alisoun does not find shame or
censure in these areas and feels they are matters to be discussed openly. While other
poets let women’s voices out completely, Chaucer broached a land never seen before not
only when he gave woman voice but also when he gave her the ability to speak freely
about anything:

The Wife invokes her knowledge of her own experience of the
private, female, domestic world, a knowledge not considered
of the same order as authorised knowledge. Moreover, against
the tradition of silence, she insists on her right to speak publicly
of this traditionally private world of women’s wisdom, the
knowledge of women’s experience most frequently conveyed
(from women to women in secret) through the spoken word.7

Not only does Alisoun speak out loudly, she speaks of the private world of
women. Alisoun often speaks about her need for self-gratification. She does not find it a
world that should be talked about behind closed doors merely among women; it should be
a world familiar to man as well and she begins her mission to make it such. This tale-
telling stage that has been constructed by man becomes her individual realm to speak
freely of those matters on her mind. She will not be told what to speak of or to stop and it becomes evident as she quotes authorities that she finds her own experience to be authoritative enough to speak and be taken seriously:

I will suggest that in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, Chaucer takes the traditional association between women and uncontrollable speech and turns it into an exploration of discursive freedom. The Wife’s discourse and her sexuality are of a piece: excessive, redundant, and subversive, they both explode into improprieties and forbidden domains.⁸

The voice in which Chaucer has given Alisoun becomes her means to establish a respectable manner among people and to show that women can be strong and really do have worth. Through Alisoun, he challenges the notion that woman should sit silently in the background and watch patiently as men run the world. When she is interrupted by her fellow male pilgrims, she mocks them, “‘Al redy, sire,’ quod she, ‘right as you lest.’ If I have licence of this worthy Frere’” (854-855). But Chaucer does not stop with the simple traits—he goes for the extreme. Chaucer created a woman not only with strength of mind, voice and personality, but also with the gumption to speak of womanly needs and desires—a topic that men have spoken of for years and not been chastised for.

The *Wife of Bath* is very public and adamant regarding not only sex as a whole, but specifically her sexuality:

> Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee!
> As help me God, I laughe whan I thynde
> How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke! (200-202)

She does not follow the normal protocol with sex being a sacred and private subject. In fact, she thrives and exalts in the topic. Chaucer not only created an open, free-speaking woman, but he went so far as to allow her to talk about something that has been taboo for
ages. Sex was not an item people spoke about so nonchalantly in the Middle Ages and for Alisoun to speak about it so easily certainly caught many audience members off guard.

The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, actively and vociferously seeks her own sexual satisfaction. She spends the first 162 lines of her prologue energetically defending a theology that acknowledges sexual activity, even sexual desire.\(^9\)

Not only does Alisoun broach the topic of sexuality, she hones into her own personal sexual desires and freely discusses her sexual relations with her husbands. She criticizes her first two husbands for not being able to keep up with her libido and acclaims her younger husbands for their performance in the bedroom:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The tre were goode men, and riche, and olde;} \\
\text{Unnethe myghte they the statut holde} \\
\text{In which that they were bouden unto me. (197-199)}
\end{align*}
\]

This new woman not only speaks of ruling the household unlike anything ever heard of before, but she also seeks sexual satisfaction for herself. She is not embarrassed to find her own source of pleasure and this trait makes her unique from the stereotypical woman of her time. Chaucer takes this free will of a woman’s character and runs with it, wondering what the audience’s reaction will be. Although this personality trait makes her original, she is often criticized for it because she tends to use sex as a means to power. Although it may be true that Alisoun finds power in sex, it is something that men have done for all ages, so essentially, she is following in the footsteps of men and making the most of the attributes about her. Chaucer saw the power points of men (voice, money, sex) and merely assigned them to a woman. Hence, the Wife of Bath appears as the over zealous, free speaking lady of the group who tends to raise a few eyebrows and
drop a few jaws, but that also seemed to be part of Chaucer’s tactics, for she certainly was not forgotten.

Alisoun is constantly exerting her independence and as seen previously, she will not let others push her down. When the Wife is interrupted by fellow pilgrims she does not cower under the pressure; instead, she takes the opportunity to slide in a subtle insult at the perpetrator. After she is interrupted by the Friar, the Host tells her to go on, she responds, “‘Al redy, sire,’ quod she, ‘right as yow lest,/If I have licence of this worthy Frere’” (855). She may have been insulted, but she does not let that stop her. Her domineering voice maintained the audiences’ attention throughout her drawn-out prologue, which does receive response from the fellow men.

Just as her personality carries over and leaves an impression, so too does her independence that is not quickly forgotten by the other pilgrims. Remarks to her tale and prologue appear later in other tales (particularly in the *Clerk’s Tale*) which demonstrates the impression she made.

One person in particular, who does not forget Alisoun is the Clerk. Throughout Alisoun’s Prologue she takes sly opportunities to downgrade Clerks in general, first by her misuse of doctrine, then by comparing her fifth husband to that of a “clerk of Oxenford” and lastly by retelling how she made her clerk subservient to her. It is clear to Alisoun that the Clerk is socially below her in her mind although in actuality, as a scholar, the Clerk would most likely be one rank above her. The Clerk listens to all of this and surely must have found offense with it, yet he says nothing. To believe that this is just a coincidence on Alisoun’s part is far from reality because it becomes apparent that she chose him from the crowd specifically to rile him:
Now the substance of the Wife’s false doctrines was not the only thing that must have roused the Clerk to protesting answer. The very manner of her discourse was a direct challenge to him. She had garnished her sermon with scraps of Holy Writ and rags and tatters of erudition, caught up, we may infer, from her last husband. Thus she had put herself into open competition with the guild of scholars and theologians, to which the Clerk belonged. Further, with her eye manifestly upon this sedate philosopher, she had taken pains to gird at him and his fellows.  

However, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue did nothing to visibly aggravate the Clerk for he sat there just as peaceful as before and did nothing. Alisoun’s prologue and tale certainly sparked conversation amongst the rest of the pilgrims yet the one person who should have spoken up in defense of himself and his rank merely sat there listening to what Bath would say next. Although the Clerk does retaliate in his own way through his tale of Griselda, he does so indirectly. His tale talks about the patience and obedience the lovely wife Griselda displays for her husband no matter what punishments he inflicts on her. The Clerk is certainly using his character in contrast to Alisoun of Bath and although it is not until the end of his tale that he directly points his lesson to Alisoun, it seems clear to the pilgrims that the tale is in response to her:

For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe--  
Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene  
In heigh maistrie, and elles were it scathe—  
I wol with lusty herte, fressh and grene,  
Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene;  
And lat us tynte of ernestful matere. (IV, 1170-1175)

This may be precisely why Alisoun chose the Clerk as her target—because he seemed like a weak man and she felt fairly certain he would say nothing in response. Unlike herself, the Clerk appeared soft spoken and timid and Alisoun made it very clear that those are the men she tends to prey off of. She used the Clerk to tell her story and make
her point, but she did not to this to intentionally hurt the Clerk, she just wanted to be
heard:

The Wife’s discourse is not malicious. She is too jovial to be
ill-natured and she protests that she speaks in jest. But it none the
less embodies a rude personal assault upon the Clerk. Whose quiet
man and habitual reticence made him seem a safe person to attack.
She had done her best to make the Clerk look ridiculous.¹⁴

Although the Wife may have made the Clerk look ridiculous, it stands to reason
that this was part of her point for the roles are typically reversed with the woman sitting
silently while the man dishes on the abuse. Alisoun was a woman who took control and
would not sit silently and Chaucer uses her to show the flip side of the denigration of the
opposite sex. But, as always, Chaucer can not leave a point one sided and this is apparent
in the Clerk’s eventual response to Alisoun’s insults. When the Clerk does get his
chance, he tells the tale of, the already much discussed, Griselda. Although this tale at
first glance seems to be antifeminist, it truly is not. The Clerk is not trying to tell women
to be submissive to their husbands, he is giving a metaphor of utter obedience to God and
the Envoy specifically clarifies that much. It is certain, however, that his tale is a direct
response to Alisoun’s tale; where she controlled her husbands and made them answer to
her, the Clerk turned it around and had the husband in control and the wife being
painfully submissive.

The Clerk is answering the Wife of Bath; he is telling of a woman
whose principles in marriage were the antithesis of hers; he is
reasserting the orthodox view in opposition to the heresy which she
had expounded with such zest and with so many flings and jeers at
the clerkly profession and character.¹⁵

The Clerk certainly did not want to appear to be misogynistic in countering Alisoun and
all she said and even his tale has little intent of antifeminism. But it is clear that he was
directing his thoughts to Alisoun, not so much for what she believed and spoke of, but for humiliating him in front of all the pilgrims. He may not have had the voice to speak out directly to her, but he certainly would not let her insults go unanswered so he put his response in his tale.

While both tales may have been extreme in their substance, Chaucer could not let one side go untold. Chaucer used Alisoun to show the wrongs of men and the antifeminists, but he countered it with the Clerk’s tale to equally expound on the trials of women. While neither of these pilgrims may have been right in their opinions, Chaucer shows the diversification of the sexes. The way in which Alisoun relates to the pilgrims in her boisterous persona and aggressive attitude is very much the way she related to her husbands.

Alisoun seeks sovereignty with her first husbands and tells of her husbands and the relationship she shared with each, “I shal seye sooth; tho housbondes that I hadde/ As thre of hem were goode, and two were/ badde” (III, 195-197). It becomes clear that she wins their love, weds them, then takes control of their money and land. Alisoun played the man’s role in the marriages for she is the powerhouse and makes them subservient to her and this becomes her goal throughout life:

It begins to seem, indeed, that she speaks from a woman’s experience and with a woman’s voice. The torment to which she subjects her first three husbands, and the purgatory that she makes of the earthly life of the fourth (III.489), are no more than the visiting upon them of the powers she has learnt and wrested from men. She shows what men, and antifeminism in particular, have done to women.\(^\text{16}\)

Alisoun’s lack of understanding of what a marriage should ideally be comes simply from her years of observing other marriages; only she takes it in her hands to reverse the roles. Chaucer demonstrates through her various relationships with her husbands what is
lacking in her marriages and it is not until Jankyn that we see Alisoun searching for more than money and power. “My fiftie housbonde—God his soule/ blesse!-/ Which that I took for love, and no richesse” (525-526). It is with her fifth husband that Chaucer shows the audience Alisoun’s change of heart and her search for a deeper understanding of marriage.

Eventually, even the initial relationship with Jankyn changes when she realizes that he will do nothing to please her. They both show their stubbornness and neither will submit to the other, but this is part of Chaucer’s lesson. While Jankyn may not willingly have given up his need to control his wife, Chaucer eventually makes the man capitulate—but not alone. Alisoun soon realizes after their marriage that Jankyn will not be submissive like her other husbands. Quite the opposite, he tried to put an end to her carousing, but Alisoun would hear nothing of it:

Stibourn I was as is a leonesse,  
And of my tonge a verray jangleresse,  
And walke I wolde, as I had doon biforn,  
From hous to hous, although he had it sworn (637-640)

Each of them struggled for the upper hand in their marriage but neither had control. It is due to the antifeminist books that Jankyn reads that inevitably brings them to the climatic point of their power struggle. “To reden on this book of wikked wyves./ He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves/ Than been of goode wyves in the Bible (685-688). Jankyn’s obsession with the tales of “wikked wyves” pushes Alisoun to the brink as she listened to him read from the book and she realized that he is more interested in his book than her. Alisoun’s strength reigns triumphant and powerful when she puts an end to the book and rips out three pages and throws them in the fire. But this is not her triumph for Jankyn responds by hitting her. However, he hits her so hard “That in the floor I lay as I were
deed” (796) and this is where the victory culminates, but it is not a victory solely for Alisoun. Although Jankyn is the one to apologize and ask for forgiveness, he does point out her faults too. This seems to be Chaucer’s sly way of giving equal opportunity to both sexes although he does allow Alisoun to go back to her old ways of mastering.

Jankyn gave her control of all the land and burned his book:

She is a most unwilling audience, and in her fury against these antifeminist readings she demonstrates something of the powerful relation of literature to life. . . . In the ensuing battle, the Wife’s persistence is sufficient to overcome Jankyn’s scholarship; the book is burned.  

This act of burning the book is symbolic of the end of an era and attitude for Jankyn. Although he may not completely agree with his Wife’s beliefs on marriage, he has reached the point of capitulation and Alisoun says, “And whan that I hadde geten unto me,/By maistrie, al the soveraynetee” (816-817). Alisoun may have reached her desired soveraynetee in her marriage but it can not be overlooked that she succumbed to a change as well. Jankyn asked of her, “Myn owene trewe wyf,/ do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;/ Keep thy honour, and keep eek myn estaat” (819-820) and Alisoun too made a promise and kept it. Though it seems that she maintains the sole triumph, each of them really corroborated in the end to make their relationship a more plausible one.

After the kiss Alisoun and Jankyn reach accord when he agrees to burn the book and she agrees to stop acting it out. Her ‘maistrie’ as many have pointed out, is fairly nominal, since she behaves properly and in his behalf afterward. But it is not, because nominal, unimportant. She had suffered during her life, not from actual domination by men, for she had learned how to manage them, but denial of her right, her justification, for independence. The burned book and domestic promise deliver her that justification, and from a clerk too, and heal a trouble deep inside her.
The depiction of Alisoun lying on the floor is well portrayed for she appeared in a vulnerable state and for once, follows her heart by asking her husband for a kiss rather than fighting her fight. It is the kiss that brings the marriage to a new level not only for the relationship, but for the personal growth of Alisoun and Jankyn. In addition, Alisoun finally reaches a relationship in which she is an equal; she is not controlled and she need not control. The two understand one another. Chaucer’s depiction of this goes from one extreme to the next but his point is well driven home and his purpose is undoubtedly served. Although she finds it initially necessary to be in control of her husbands, she can not be faulted for this because she simply followed suit to what the men usually do. However, she was willing to change her ways after she learned the importance of equality and friendship in a marriage and it was from then on that, “I was to hym as kynde/ As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde./ And also trewe, and so was he to me” (823-825). An agreement is reached between the two and happiness ensues.

Chaucer used Alisoun to create a new understanding of power in a marriage and he makes it clear through various tales that there should be no power struggle in such a relationship as we see the outcome of Alisoun and Jankyn. “The importance of the Wife of Bath in stimulating questions about marriage and power is nevertheless not to be underestimated, and has already been mentioned as a vigorous part of the life of The Canterbury Tales in the 1390’s”.19 The Wife of Bath was open and candid on the subject of marriage in her time and she was not afraid to speak her mind. Her choice of topics, her voice and her persona were among the reasons that she so quickly captivated her audience.
"The Wife has a strong effect on her audience as we see when the Pardoner interrupts her during her prologue to compliment her for being a "noble prechour" on the subject of marriage."\(^\text{20}\) The wife easily captures the attention of the pilgrims without a doubt for she is certainly one of the most interrupted of the tale tellers. Regardless of whether the comments are positive or negative, her audience is hearing what she is saying and she is certainly making an impression on them. While only a handful of the pilgrims—the Frere, the Somonour, the Hooste, the Pardoner—may comment on her prologue and tales, that is not to say that others are not affected by her words. As we have seen, the Clerk is just one example of a pilgrim who was deeply moved by her words but saved his response (at least until later). The words that come from Bath are not taken lightly either. While some seem to mock her toward the end, such as the Frere, others take her knowledge to heart as we hear concern from the Pardoner:

"Now, dame," quod her, "by God and Seint John! Ye been a noble prechour in this cas. I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas! What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere? Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!" (163-168)

If nothing else, Alisoun is definitely attributed for her knowledge on the subject of marriage and many of the pilgrims find her to be of authority on the topic. While she is without a doubt insurmountable where her fellow pilgrims are concerned, the same holds true for the readers of the tales.

Just as the pilgrims could not overlook Alisoun of Bath, nor could the readers throughout the ages. It is nearly impossible to respond to the *Canterbury Tales* without some mention of Alisoun for her character appears the strongest of all.

Dame Alice is not simply an irresistible young animal to be chased to the nearest corner; she is middle-aged travelworn, sprung in the
hips. But much of the flash and vitality is still there, and it is nearly impossible for us not to feel sympathetically drawn to the faded, world wise ex-beauty, fully able to defend herself.\textsuperscript{21}

This much is true of Alisoun of Bath because she no longer has the beauty like that of Alisoun from \textit{Miller’s Tale}, or the demeanor of Griselda or even the education of the Prioress, but she takes what she does have—her experience, forcefulness and strength— and utilizes those attributes to the best of her ability and essentially captivates audiences and inspires women. Unfortunately, her character has been criticized (by pilgrims and audiences) for her misuse of doctrine and for her open admittance that the voices of women are unimportant, but these are part of the details that add to the complexity and notoriety of her character. In addition, who she is can, in part, be credited to society’s impression on her:

Since arguments like these were heard continually from the pulpit, Alisoun is demonstrating that she moves in a society which insistently maligns her, not only for her sins and errors (which she has committed her share of), but for her very existence.\textsuperscript{22}

There was no sense in denying the woman’s place in society for Alisoun or for Chaucer because it was simply a fact of life. But Chaucer will not let Alisoun sit idly by and allow the culture to put restraints on who and what she is; thus, the Wife of Bath becomes the audacious, outspoken woman who, though often scoffed at, still earns a great deal of respect for her courageous outcries. And though she may misquote doctrines, it is certain that she has heard what has been said and she is knowledgeable. In fact, she may be manipulating words for her own benefit rather than out of ignorance. Also, although she may not have been the leader of the feminist party, she did open the eyes and ears of a society that was not accepting of the liberated woman.
Through Alisoun, Chaucer created a woman that showed independence and vibrancy—someone not to be overlooked. Her determination to take on the role of the man and exert sovereignty in a marriage may have been extreme, but Chaucer used this to demonstrate the absurdity of the commonality of the “man’s world.” In addition, the Wife’s blatant display of incombant behavior regarding her husbands (specifically Jankyn) leads her to the lesson of equality in a relationship. She is wise enough to know when common grounds must be reached and she does not let the opportunity pass her by. Even though she still claims sovereignty with Jankyn, she has also promised him to be true and kind and she holds to that. He may have changed for her, but she changed as well. Chaucer knew the sexes well and the stubbornness each possessed, yet he still concocted an accord that was reached in which equality was found. The Wife of Bath is without a doubt, one of Chaucer’s best produced characters and is certain to leave a memorable impression on all:

Essentially comic personalities stand out in the General Prologue and Tales. The most elaborately developed is the Wife (that is, woman) of Bath, who describes her life and exposes her character with totally credible volubility in a perfect dramatic monologue.23

The Wife of Bath is not the last of the impressionable women of Chaucer. In The Miller’s Tale we encounter another woman, who may not be as outspoken or as strong as Alisoun of Bath, but who certainly has her way of duping the men that surround her. This Alisoun schemes and connives and while all the men around her receive retribution for their actions; she stands solely victorious as she laughs at their pain. Chaucer once again creates a woman who can be called nothing else but victorious. And much like
Alisoun of Bath, this Alisoun will not surge the way for the feminist movement, but she
will leave audiences applauding her spirit as she challenges society.

Whatever may be the interpretation she places on the *Miller’s Tale*,
the Wife of Bath must have enjoyed it thoroughly. Her own
prologue and tale are similar exercises in turning everything upside
down, but with the Wife of Bath, Chaucer seems to be exploring
similar questions under a different theme, a theme that the Wife
herself identifies as experience and authority as alternative means
of understanding the truth.²⁴

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¹ Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 139. Pearsall looks at the various women that Chaucer created
and finds at least one strength in each of the women that Chaucer seems to have purposefully given them in
order to show their strengths in different ways. He once again emphasizes Chaucer’s dissatisfaction with
women portrayed in the common, medieval type roles of the submissive woman. For more see pp.135-143.
the entire scene that the storytelling of the *Canterbury Tales* is set in and sees the changes that England is
undergoing. According to Knapp, Chaucer takes this opportunity of change and uses it to his benefit to
create the unique characters that are found in the tales, particularly the women characters. However, Knapp
also sees the resistance that will come throughout these changes.
³ Michaela Paasche Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*. (South Carolina: University of South
Carolina Press, 1996), p. 101. Grudin studies dialogue through the *Canterbury Tales* and believes it is
speech that uncovers insights into society and characters. Chaucer’s ability to capture the reality of the
dialogue and characters is part of what makes the Tales so well known, believes Grudin.
⁴ Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, p. 120.
⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, p. 116. Bath is seen by Dinshaw as a very complex
character of whom Chaucer enjoyed the creation of. Dinshaw believes that her irrepressible attitude
appears when least expected and her goading of the Friar and the Pardoner add a sense of humor and
lightness to her person. Dinshaw quotes Robert A. Pratt here on his insights of the Wife that can be found
in his work, *The Development of the Wife of Bath*.
⁶ Michaela Paasche Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, p. 1. Grudin finds Bath to be one of
those characters whose personality is learned specifically from her speech.
⁷ Barbara Strauss, p. 128.
⁹ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, p. 117. Unlike Chaucer’s other women characters, Dinshaw
finds the Wife of Bath to be unique in the way that she expresses her individual desires.
¹⁰ According to Carl Lindahl in *Earnest Games* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), it is
Alisoun’s economic success that has pushed her up the social ladder, “but her trade (a minor mistery) and
her behavior might work to confine her among the churls.” Right near the top of the lower middle class
would be the Clerk until he received his doctorate in which case he would be admitted to the Squire’s table.
For more see pp. 19-25.
¹¹ G.L. Kittredge, “Chaucer’s discussion of Marriage” in *Critical Essays on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*,
ed. Malcolm Andrew (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991) p. 12. Kittredge studies the specific tale
tellers from the marriage group and how they interact with one another. He gives substantial evidence at
Chaucer’s intent to create a group a tales directly related to marriage and how the tales tie in with one
another, but seem to be unrelated to the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*. Kittredge devotes a great deal of
time to the Wife of Bath and the Clerk and their silent exchange with one another.
¹² According to Kittredge, Chaucer purposefully made the Clerk sit silently and allow the rest to speak and
tell stories. This was not the Clerk’s way of accepting what Alisoun had said, but simply his way of
gathering and forming his thoughts for how he would retaliate against Bath. For more see pp. 13 – 20 in the above listed text.

13 According to Kittredge in “Chaucer’s discussion of Marriage,” the Clerk was specifically aiming his tale in contrast to Alisoun of Bath and although he does not come out directly and say this, it was his way of retaliating for the things she said against him in her prologue. For more see pp. 15-19.


15 G. L. Kittredge, “Chaucer’s discussion of Marriage”, p. 15. Kittredge expounds on the many points about what the tale of Griselda is about, but mainly comes down to the point that the Clerk was using it as a means to contradict the Wife of Bath in a peaceful, yet poignant manner. For more details on the subject see pp. 15-19.

16 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 259. Pearsall finds Alisoun to be a unique character in the way that she expounds so heavily on her strength to play what has thus far been the man’s role. But eventually, even Alisoun gives up the fight to always be the power person and in the end, she marries her fifth husband for love.

17 David Williams, The Canterbury Tales: A literary Pilgrimage (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1987), p.69. Williams discusses the Wife’s outrage at the antifeminists reading. However, Williams finds irony in her feminism because he claims her tale subscribed to the anti-feminist cliché that all women desire to be raped. For more details see pp. 69-73

18 Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Contest, p. 126. Knapp goes in depth with her discussion and critique of Alisoun of Bath. In this section (“Alisoun’s Dream and Fight”), Alisoun’s actions regarding the antifeminist book and her reaction of asking for a kiss after being hit by Jankyn are studied in depth. Knapp believes that even though she appears victorious over her husband in the end, she too has changed her ways in order to make her marriage a better one. For more see pp. 124-126.

19 Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 253. The marriage group is examined by Pearsall and the importance Chaucer placed on the different ranges of interactions between husband and wife. He also notes that Chaucer puts a great deal of emphasis on the problem of a woman’s place in a marriage and the suggestions he makes in various tales regarding woman’s sovereignty. For more details on the marriage group according to Pearsall, see pp 253-262.


21 Robert O. Payne, p. 120.

22 Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Contest, p. 119. Knapp believes that rather than being victimized she takes control of the situation. Alisoun can not be viewed as a liberator but rather a commentator for women’s rights.

23 George Kane, Chaucer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 98. Kane notes that the characters of the Tales represent different types of personalities and morals that Chaucer encountered in his life time. Kane views these characters as triumphs for their actuality and genuineness.

24 David Williams, The Canterbury Tales: A literary Pilgrimage, p. 64.
IV. The Triumphant Woman Arrives

A victorious woman reigning over men is the stage that Chaucer has set for his audience. Chaucer may have seemed daring, even audacious in introducing such a woman, but it becomes obvious that he enjoys his creation because he does not stop with just one triumphant woman. Alisoun of Bath was bold and experienced through years and this is part of what accounts for her persona. Then Chaucer gives us Alisoun of Bath’s foil character when he introduces her namesake, Alisoun from The Miller’s Tale. This Alisoun is quiet, small, beautiful, young and a country girl. She is even portrayed as rather naïve. Chaucer could not have typified a more intense opposite. The only commonality these two share is their victory over men. Yet, this young Alisoun is just as intriguing as Alisoun of Bath.

In The Miller’s Tale, relationships and the way the men and women interact are once again the central aspects. Much like The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, the Miller’s Alisoun is depicted through various men. Alisoun is introduced with her husband, John, trying to control her, then Absolon, trying to win her heart and lastly, Nicholas, trying to get her into bed. This Alisoun exerts her strength as she releases her sexual desires and a series of pranks are pulled. All the men become victims of the practical jokes in some way, while Alisoun stands by and laughs and finally walks away unscathed.

The Miller’s Tale begins with the description of the men and once John is introduced the typical bonds of marriage in Chaucer’s time are exerted, “Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage, / For she was wylde and yong, and he was old” (I, 3225-
The control over his wife are immediately admitted, although “he lovede [her] moore than his lyf” (3222). Unfortunately, John did not follow the wisdom of “Catoun” which advises that “man sholde wedde his simylitude” (3228). John ends up married to a woman half his age, which in turn leads to his extreme jealousy. Not only is Alisoun young, but beautiful as well: “She was ful moore blisful on to see/ Than is the newe perjonette tree” (3247-3249). This is to some extent the reason for John’s dominance over Alisoun for he fears if he does not control her, he will lose her: “The husbands of the Miller’s Tale and the Manciple’s Tale think they have their wives tamed and in cages”.

Although John’s love for Alisoun and his instability in their relationship causes him to exert power over Alisoun, this ploy of his will quickly unravel as Chaucer demonstrates this behavior over women is inappropriate. It also becomes clear that Alisoun fears her husband’s jealousy:

Myn housbonde is so ful of jalousie
That but ye wayte wel and been privee,
I woot right wel I nam but deed,” quod she. (3294-3296)

John’s idea of marriage is not atypical for Chaucer’s time and this type of behavior would not have shocked any audience members, yet Chaucer allows the tables to turn and the husband to look like a “cuckhold.” It becomes evident that John’s intentions toward Alisoun are good and, unlike many husbands of his day, he means her no harm; but he also does not want to be tricked by a woman. When Nicholas tells John of the flood, John is immediately worried about Alisoun, “Alas, my wyf!/ And shal she drenche? Alas, myn Alisoun” (3522-3523). It becomes clear that he loves her and wants to protect her and though his intentions are good he makes the mistake of trying to rule a wife that can not be ruled. John thinks that he has mastered his wife by keeping her under lock and
key, but Chaucer is soon to show that equality is the only way in a marriage. "In fact it is John and Phoebus who are in prison, in thrall to their obsessive uxoriousness, and it is their wives who are free with themselves."^d

While one man tries to make up for his insecurities by controlling his wife, another one exercises his confidence by going after a married woman. Absolon is introduced as the parish clerk in all his glory with his curly blonde hair and his ruddy face. Chaucer depicts him as a man who is always looking for the women, but never seems to get them, "Sensyne the wyves of the parisshe faste;/ And many a lovely look on hem he caste" (3341-3342). It becomes evident that he has little respect not only for women, but also for the institution of marriage, but Chaucer will be sure to set things right for this crime. Absolon is found underneath Alisoun’s window singing in the middle of the night while John lays beside her and Absolon seems to think he is paying Alisoun a great compliment to take an interest in her. Absolon’s ego is evidently out of the typical realm for he does not stop when his initial passes are rejected; he has the audacity to believe that Alisoun, being the naïve country girl, is just playing hard to get. "He [Chaucer] has made the action involving Alisoun and Absolon flow from the fact that she is an earthy country girl and he is an effeminate fastidious dandy."^5

Absolon assumes that since his social status is higher than that of Alisoun’s, she would certainly find him desirable. However, even after Alisoun initially rejects him, he does not give up and he continues to try and exert his power to win her over. The word of the woman means little to Absolon—he is a citified, knowledgeable man, while Alisoun is a naïve country girl. Once Absolon thinks John has left town, he sets off to
make yet another play on Alisoun. At her window Absolon calls longingly to her, but she rejects him yet again:

    I love another—and elles I were to blame—
    Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon.
    Go forth thy or I wol caste a ston, (3710-3713)

Even after Alisoun has blatantly rejected Absolon, he still tries to persuade her. It becomes clear that Absolon takes no heed to Alisoun’s desires and opinions because he only has himself in mind, “Thanne kysse me, syn it may be no bet” (3716). He shows no respect to Alisoun’s words, feelings or even her marriage. Absolon is condescending not only to her social stature, but also to the fact that she is a woman and he makes it clear that she can not possibly know what she truly desires. Exerting his power over her and taking her for his own becomes his foci and nothing will stand in the way of that. Fortunately, Chaucer shows great distaste for Absolon’s arrogant attitude and disrespect for women. But Absolon is not the last of the dominating men.

Although Nicholas comes first in the chronology, Alisoun does not punish him; his punishment is indirect. Nicholas is the first of the three men to be introduced and not only is he good looking and intelligent, but he is “hende” as well. He immediately starts after Alisoun professing his love of her if only she will give him her body, “Ywis, but if ich have my wille,/ For deerne love of thee, lemmam, I spille” (3277-3278). Nicholas is not shy with his affections or desires and he makes it clear that he has no qualms regarding the fact that she is married. Alisoun initially rejects Nicholas’ advances, but he makes it very clear that he will pay no heed to the words of a woman when his own desires are on the line. He continues to make passes at Alisoun and even uses physical force to persuade her until she gives in: “And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones”
(3279). Typical of the men in this tale, Nicholas shows little respect toward Alisoun and her wishes until his needs are met. While he may be the smartest of the men, he still displays his masculinity through domination over the woman. While he is described as clever and intelligent, his intelligence seems to fail him in regards to women and how they should be treated. Being a scholarly man, Nicholas should be the one out of the three men within the tale to know enough about etiquette and should treat women with respect, yet he appears to be the worst of the three. He ignores Alisoun’s rejection of him and strives to fulfill his own wants and in addition, he is physically forceful with her. It appears more than ironic that Nicholas’ punishment is the worst of the three men. Chaucer seems to be chastising Nicholas for his blatant lack of respect toward Alisoun and women in general and Chaucer certainly teaches him a lesson he will not forget. Before looking at the outcomes of these three men, it is essential to take note of Alisoun and her demeanor.

Unlike Dame Alisoun of Bath, this Alisoun has none of the expected characteristics one would look for in Chaucer’s women. Alisoun in the Miller’s Tale in fact, fits the typical description of most women in Chaucer’s time by focusing on her beauty rather than her personal attributes. “The much-quoted description of Alison is a particularly striking example. Its wording unmistakably suggests the traditional praise of female beauty.” She is described as young and naïve, a country girl. Like many women of fourteenth century literature, it is her beauty that intrigues the audience:

She was ful moore blisful on to see  
Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,  
And softer than the wolle is of a wether,  
And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether,  
Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun.  
In al this world, to seken up and doun,
Being a country girl suggests she lacks the experience and knowledge of a strong woman (such as Alisoun of Bath). Chaucer even goes so far as to give such detail to her looks as if suggesting she was blessed with beauty but not with brains. The sexism of this passage clearly stands out given that Alisoun is noted for only one thing: her physical attributes. This suggests that if it were not for her looks, Alisoun would not be a part of the tale. This certainly sets the audience up for later surprises because it is assumed that Alisoun will become merely a pawn in the plot.

When Alisoun does speak out for the first time it is rather shocking because we do not anticipate this beauty to have any strength of voice. However, she tries to stand up to her dominant male, Nicholas:

“I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
Why, lat be!” quod she. “Lat be, Nicholas,
Or I wol crie ‘out, harrow’ and ‘allas’!
Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisy!” (3284-3287)

Threatening to call for help gives Alisoun more strength than one would expect especially since the previous line describes her as a skittish colt (3263). Her child-like gestures suggesting weakness does not coincide with her strength of voice or her crude mannerisms. These contradicting qualities were no mistake on Chaucer’s part for he knew what the audience expected and he knew what he would produce.

In detailing her as a country girl the audience expects her to be naïve about the new city life she is leading. What Chaucer was actually doing was justifying the crude behavior of hers that is forthcoming. Amidst her crude behavior we also find a woman who is willing to fulfill her own sexual desires. Although she initially pushes Nicholas
and his advances away, she listens to all he has to offer her sexually and after little consideration (a mere five lines in which Nicholas, “swoor hir ooth” (3291)), she agrees to sleep with him. Chaucer seems to justify her actions through her lack of education and knowledge, but it is not to be overlooked that we are given another woman, in addition to Alisoun of Bath, who is just as concerned about her sexual needs as a man and this woman not only considers her own needs but acts on them as well:

And if so be the game wente aright,  
She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght,  
For this was his desir and hire also. (3405-3407)

Chaucer first gives the audience the typical woman of his time, fighting off male advances, but this woman quickly falls from the stereotype because she begins to consider her own wants:

Ritualized male aggression meets ritualised female reluctance—indeed, with its own distorted chivalrousness, it is designed to allow that reluctance expression and so preserve the fiction that the woman yields to the man’s sexual desire, not her own. The flowery language with which Nicholas’s physical aggression is accompanied is also designed to support this fiction: it is the condition that ‘nice’ women exact as a sign that they are not easy game.⁷

Chaucer wanted Alisoun to be liked by the audience and in order to do so he had to keep her up to standards. This is not to say, however, that the standards could not be changed along the way and that a woman could not express her own desires just as men do.

The steps Chaucer takes in creating this coming of age woman is no mistake; Alisoun is the first of Chaucer’s dominant women in the Tales. He begins her character by giving the audience what they have come to expect of a woman—a quiet, naïve girl with ample beauty, who is constantly dominated by man. But then Chaucer gives her
strength of voice and a sneaky, cleverness that was not initially apparent. “Alison was not merely the heroine of The Miller’s Tale but its presiding spirit,” says Patterson.\(^8\)

And Alisoun and her cleverness continue as we see the jape unfold.

Three dominant men all after the same thing—control of the woman. Chaucer brings them to life, creates them according to the stereotype, weaves a plot and just when one is ready to cry “misogynist,” Chaucer turns the whole play around and leaves the woman laughing while the men tend to their wounds—physical and egotistical. Nicholas has John convinced there is a flood coming and has John waiting on the roof while he and Alisoun spend the night in bed together. Alisoun and Nicholas laugh at the trick played on the foolish John for believing there was a flood. Nicholas may have devised the scheme, but Alisoun is a willing participant in the deed and she exhibits her strength of mind and will by doing what she wants. However, the audience does not reject her for her unfaithfulness to her husband. She exerts her independence by fulfilling her own wants even if it is at the cost of her husband, but according to George Kane, that is not her flaw:

> What devalues her is not so much the deceit of her husband, who was too old to marry her in the first place, as the fact that it is she who thinks up the undebatably nasty trick to dispose of her unwanted second suitor.\(^9\)

Contrary to Kane’s beliefs, what comes next of Alisoun’s behavior still does not seem to deter the audience because it is her actions that add to the humor of the fabliau. In addition, many will inevitably applaud Alisoun for her creative and clever means at ridding herself of an egotistical pest who thinks he is doing Alisoun a great honor by calling on her.
When Absolon arrives at the window, we see Alisoun’s irritation at the
interruption of her lovemaking with Nicholas. She immediately takes charge of the
situation and tells Absolon “Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool,” (3708). The true colors of
Alisoun’s personality are appearing, as she becomes the upper hand, first by yelling at
Absolon, next by devising a trick of her own. When Absolon does not heed her warnings
to leave, it becomes clear that Alisoun will be possessed no longer. Taking on Nicholas’
role as trickster, she too requires an audience in order to make the joke complete. She
first yells down to Absolon, then whispers to Nicholas:

“Thanne make thee redy,” quod she, “I come
anon.”
And unto Nicholas she seyde stille,
“Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille.” (3720-3722)

As Nicholas watches Alisoun take charge and weave a web of her own, Absolon climbs
to the window, awaiting a surprise of his own: “And at the wyndow out she putte hir
hole” (3732). Although her trick is crude, it does not lose out on its meaningfulness.
Chaucer uses Alisoun in this instance not only to exert her ability to take control, but to
also show that she will not be controlled. Here, the woman becomes the dominant force
not to be reckoned with and although she submits to immature cruelty, her scheme
illustrates that she can be just as clever as the men.

The jape does not stop here though and what is next to unfold takes a feminist
twist. Nicholas readily acknowledges that he has been outdone by Alisoun—her trick is
by far the superior. Unfortunately, Chaucer demonstrates that the male ego will not be
outshone by a woman. Nicholas tries to regain control of the situation and reinstate
himself as master (of the joke and Alisoun):
The climax of *The Miller's Tale* takes place when Nicholas is "hende" once too often. Bent on avenging Alisoun's insult to his dignity, Absolon returns from the smithy of Gerveys with a hot colter. By this time, however, 'hende' Nicholas has risen and is at hand and being clever he thinks he will improve upon the coarse trick performed by Alisoun. He does 'amend al the jape,' not in the way he had anticipated, but by bringing about crude and effective poetic justice.\(^{10}\)

When Absolon returns, he is enraged and it is he who thinks he will "amend al the jape;", however, it is both of the men that are mistaken here. Nicholas tries to show his superiority of mind and trickery over Alisoun and it is he who puts his "toute" out the window next, but there is no laughter from him to follow because Absolon takes the hot iron and burns his offender. Alisoun was the initiator of this particular jape, but she is the one who receives no punishment for her crudeness or cruelty. However, some critics do not see this as a triumph on Alisoun's part. According to Elaine Tuttle Hansen:

> I also want to open up for discussion the fact that it is only an accident, a side-effect of Nicholas' intervention in Alisoun's prank, that saves the female from punishment of a particularly vicious sort.\(^{11}\)

It is true that this cruelty was meant for Alisoun, which could be deemed misogynistic. However, it is not the female who receives this punishment—it is the male. Chaucer had every intention of demonstrating the error of the men's ways in trying to control Alisoun. If his intentions were otherwise, Chaucer would not have let Alisoun walk away unscathed while the men all receive some sort of ailment. But Chaucer does not stop at punishing only the extreme perpetrator (Nicholas); Chaucer continues to wreak havoc on the men.

> With his bottom burnt, Nicholas cries out in pain, "Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!" (3815). Up on the roof, John hears Nicholas' cry for water and John
immediately thinks the flood has come, "Alas, now comth Nowelis/ flood!" (3818).

John cuts the rope and comes crashing to the ground. Nicholas, Alisoun and the neighbors all come out to see what has happened and laugh at John. For John, his worse fear has come about: he was always worried about being made a cuckold by his wife and he was not once, but twice. Alisoun cheats on John with Nicholas and was able to do so through sly trickery and then, due to her prank on Absonlon, John is humiliated in front of all his neighbors when they come out to see him in a broken barrel. It seems only fitting that John should be humiliated as a sort of punishment for trying to control Alisoun, "Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale goes unscathed as if she can not be blamed for wanting ways out of her cage."

Absonlon was the other man who found it necessary to exert his control over Alisoun and he too received retribution for his crimes. The trick that Alisoun plays on him is only fitting for although he receives no physical abuse, he is humiliated and disgusted by the act and who better to play the prank on him than the woman who had to suffer under him. While his punishment is not severe, Chaucer does not let his "crimes of passion" go unnoticed and Absonlon receives a small defeat at the hands of a woman.

Lastly, Nicholas’ punishment is the most severe of them all as it should be. Not only does he force himself on Alisoun in the very beginning when she says "No," he continues to try and dominant her as we see in the last scene with the joke. He makes it clear that he will not let a woman be superior in anything, even a trick. In the end Chaucer teaches Nicholas a lesson that will not be forgotten; not only is he burned on the butt, he also is humiliated. In addition, his plot has backfired on him and he is no longer perceived as the clever, "hende" Nicholas. All the men in the tale try to control Alisoun.
and Chaucer makes it clear that not only will she not be controlled, those who try will be punished. While all the men receive some retribution for their part in the plot, Alisoun stands alone. Alisoun is the only one in the tale who walks away unharmed. Essentially, she is the cause of everyone’s doom; Absolon looks like a “jape” due to his asking for a kiss, Nicholas gets “brende so his toute” for trying to outdo her joke and John is “holde wood in al the toun” because Nicholas wants to sleep with Alisoun. In retrospect, the play revolves around Alisoun and she walks away unscathed:

And as most readers have agreed, what could be more fitting than Alisoun’s escape? For, in her naturalness and lack of pretension, she is already a completely comfortable inhabitant of the wholly mundane world of this tale.¹³

Alisoun partakes in all of Nicholas’ devious schemes and she even comes up with a few of her own, yet while her partner in crime receives severe chastisement for his actions, she walks away unscathed. This is Chaucer at his best showing the audience the clever woman who can be more clever than the men and not suffer the consequences of her actions. Chaucer creates Alisoun in the typical stereotype of his time, making her appear naïve and weak, but once she is given the opportunity, an unfamiliar, strong woman steps into place and comes out superior. She can think of her own accord, she can act on her own free will and she can play the games that men play, the only difference is that she does not get caught. To end The Miller’s Tale with the woman thinking and acting of her own free will was inconceivable at the time, yet Alisoun is free from any chastisement. Chaucer understands the woman’s need to be her own person, not simply her husband’s possession:

And in the last analysis, Alison evaded both the possessiveness of male desire and the severity of male judgement: the elegant
plot spun its web around her without actually entangling her and she provided not only the model for the tale’s climatic joke, but also, and against all expectation, the norm by which we were invited to understand her world.\textsuperscript{14}

Chaucer’s first dominant woman does not appear so at first glance. He plays up to the typical prototype of his time and he expounds on her weaknesses. Then, out of nowhere, this woman comes to the audience and makes it clear that she has had enough. She will not be simply a pawn at the hands of men and she will stand up for herself. In addition, she shows her cunning and finesse that the audience was unaware she possessed. Chaucer lets the woman be free to act on her own, of her own free will and he does not punish her for wanting and expecting more. On the contrary, he applauds her and allows her to have the last laugh at the men for trying to dominate her. Alisoun’s true person comes out and Chaucer reveals the unheard of concept of women as triumphant and supreme.

After studying the Wife of Bath and Alisoun of Miller, it seems more than coincidence that Chaucer would give his two leading ladies the same name, but create them in such opposition as far as their personalities are concerned. Did Chaucer do this with some hidden intent or was “Alisoun” just a common name? The next chapter will examine the two women closely and try to unravel Chaucer’s intent, whether it is a slip on his part or a true test of what’s in a name.

\textsuperscript{1} Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds ed. Robert P. Miller, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 453. Within this source Jean de Meun writes about the “Catoun” which was a book that stated rules to follow in life. One of those rules regarding marriage was that man should marry his equal in age and social
class. This is obviously familiar to Chaucer because within *The Miller’s Tale* we witness what happens to a man who disregards the “Catoun’s” wisdom and marries outside his class and age.

2 Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Oxford, Blackwell Press, 1992), p 256. Pearsall compares the marriages of the women in the *Miller’s Tale* and *The Manciple’s Tale* and notes that it is really the husbands who will come to pay the price for being so foolish in marrying young women and thinking they will be able to control them.

3 This goes back to what the social critics discuss regarding women during medieval times. The men may not have intended ill-will towards women, but it was socially acceptable to denigrate women. For more see Derek Brewer, *Chaucer in his Time*, (Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1963) or Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

4 Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 256. Pearsall notes that one aspect of the fabliaux is the prison of marriage which typically ends with the seduction of the wife.


7 Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press International, 1991) p. 100. Mann takes Chaucer’s writings and looks at them from a feminist perspective concentrating on the stereotypes that Chaucer often uses. Mann, however, focuses on the stereotypes and how Chaucer deviates from the expected. According to Mann, Chaucer may initially create a character according to what is practical in his time, but then he changes what is expected and adds more to the character. Such is the case of Alisoun. This character originally fights off her sexuality, but then she not only succumbs to her personal wants, she goes to extensive means to fulfill them.

8 Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) p. 286. Patterson focuses on the individuality of the characters and what each offers the tales. He finds Alisoun to be the life of the tale while her beauty “elicit the male desire that motivated the tale” she escapes judgement and retribution. Patterson sees Alisoun as vital and resourceful for a woman of Chaucer’s Tales.

9 George Kane, *Chaucer*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 106. Kane discusses how much Chaucer uses sexuality and self gratification as a topic particularly in the *Tales*. Kane focuses on the various women in the *Tales* and their search for sexual fulfillment in conjunction with their wayward behavior.

10 Paul E. Beichner, “Characterization in *The Miller’s Tale*” in Chaucer Criticism I, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1960) p. 127. Beichner applauds Chaucer for the cleverness of the fabliau and for the portraits of each of the characters. Beichner feels that Chaucer’s characters seem as if the plot was made specifically for them rather than they being made for the plot.

11 Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Los Angelos, University of California Press, 1992) p. 226. Hansen argues that this tale should not be deemed a triumph for women because there is blatant evidence of misogyny throughout the tale, particularly the retribution that Alisoun was supposed to receive, but due to fate, she escaped.

12 Pricilla Martin, p. 75.

13 Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 135. Strohm looks at even the minutest details in *The Miller’s Tale* and notes that every aspect is part of the plot. He points out that Chaucer does not give any unnecessary details and this allows the readers to enjoy the tale more fully because there is less distraction and it makes the sequence of events unfold smoothly and believably.

14 Lee Patterson, p 285.
V. What's in a Name

It seems unlikely that Chaucer would create two women that are so seemingly different, but at the same time, two women that make such an impact on audiences. Alisoun of *The Miller's Tale* and Alisoun of Bath's only commonality seems to be their name. However, although their differences are obvious, their similarities are equally as striking as we will see in the comparison of the two. Chaucer's ability to create such contradicting, yet impacting women becomes apparent through the Alisouns. It is far more than a coincidence that Chaucer created two women, gave them the same name, made them entirely opposite, but gave them the same crusade—to conquer man. Alisoun of *The Miller's Tale* is young and beautiful, Alisoun of Bath is old and ugly; Alisoun of Miller is quiet and naïve, Alisoun of Bath is vocal and worldly. Through comparisons, it appears more than coincidental that Chaucer gave these two prominent women the same name.

The first Alisoun Chaucer introduces is Alisoun of *The Miller's Tale*. She comes on the scene quietly and inconspicuously. On first impression she appears to fit the typical role of women during Chaucer's time, as she is described only for her physical attributes: "Fair was this yonge wyf, and ther withal/As any wezele hir body gent and smal" (I, 3233-3234). Like most women in medieval literature, she is described for her beauty and this is the reason she is the focal point for the tale—or so it seems. It is her good looks that make the carpenter worry about being made a cuckold and that catch the
eye of young Nicholas, "She was ful moore blisful on to see/ Than is the new pere jonette tree" (3246-3247). In addition to ample description of her beauty, Chaucer also details her as a country girl, implying that she is naive and uncultured, "A barmclooth as whit as morne milk/ Upon hir lendes, ful of many a goore" (3236-3237). This in turn sets up the entire notion of Alisoun being innocent and harmless. Chaucer uses all these minut details to create this stereotypical helpless woman and he is successful in his attempt to slide her onto the scene as inconspicuously as possible, unlike Griselda who immediately is depicted as a woman, “of vertuous beautee” (IV, 211). Alisoun, on the other hand, initially, has no outstanding quality. The qualities of this Alisoun leave no lasting impression on the audience, but Chaucer will soon change all this.

According to George Kane, Chaucer depicts every attitude regarding women, yet Chaucer exemplifies his belief that women are oversimplified and portrayed badly in literature because it is written by men.¹ Creating Alisoun as just another generic woman is Chaucer's way of introducing a character that initially will be ineffectual, but will, with little effort, inevitably leave a lasting impression. The audience expects nothing from this Alisoun because she is quiet, uneducated and, therefore, inconsequential. However, she slowly moves onto the scene with a little more vigor than we would expect. Chaucer does something radically different with this woman in the way she exerts her feminine wiles in order to gain self- fulfillment. Unlike any woman seen thus far, she is out to serve herself but she does not advertise her intentions the way the Wife of Bath does. Alisoun in The Miller's Tale is inconspicuous in her “crusade.”

Nicholas starts making passes at Alisoun and instead of submitting to the will of a man, Alisoun exerts her strength and shows him she is not a prize to be had: "I wol nat
kisse thee, by my fey!/ Why, lat be!' quod she. 'Lat be, Nicholas, / Or I wol crie 'out, 'harrow' and 'allas'' (3284-3286). But even this brief show of strength does not last long because once Nicholas, "swoor hir ooth" (3291), she gives in and agrees to meet with him behind her husband's back. In part, Chaucer is showing that Alisoun is feeding her own sexual needs, but it clearly appears to the audience that this Alisoun is weak and giving into the whims of a man. She puts up a good fight, but collapses under the pressure and the audience is not suprised by this in anyway because giving into a man's wants is typical of women's actions in Chaucer's time:

Champions of taking a responsibly "historical" or "medieval" viewpoint toward Chaucer's text often depict a late medieval universe of discourse unrelievedly insistent on the virtues of passivity and modest silence for women.²

Alisoun's demeanor is very unambiguous and her silence is normal if not expected. But this is just one of Chaucer's ploys to bring forth the victorious woman as it soon becomes apparent that Chaucer's use of the word "wezel" to depict Alisoun earlier in the tale has more implications than originally seems.³

Unlike Alisoun of Bath, Alisoun of *The Miller's Tale* does not spout off at the mouth or try to demonstrate her knowledge, however limited. This Alisoun sits quietly by and weaves her own web of trickery and victory. Rather than carry out her reign of terror like Alisoun of Bath, this Alisoun reverts to deceit on her husband to fulfill her own wants. Alisoun is tired of her husband's jealousy and she agrees with Nicholas' scheme to make him look like a fool and gain an evening with Nicholas. Knapp points out the bold woman versus the passive woman which were becoming common in Chaucer's writings; Alisoun begins out meek and, seemingly, subservient, then suddenly, becomes strong-willed.⁴ Here again we see Chaucer creating a character who is at odds
with her own wants and what is expected of her, but Chaucer leads this woman on a path that is not expected. Alisoun does not outwardly try to aggravate her husband John, but she does inflict agony on the perpetrators of her freedom.

As has been noted in the previous chapter, John, Absolon and Nicholas—all try to own Alisoun. Initially, it does not seem to bother her and she just accepts this as part of her life. She does what John wants her to do and then she gives into Nicholas’ wishes. Even her annoyance at Absolon does not come out as she simply ignores his calling at her window: “And she answere hir housbonde therwithal/ ‘Yis, God woot, John, I heere it every deel’” (3368-3369). Alisoun accepts all these men trying to own her and it is not uncommon or unusual to Chaucer’s audience. She does not try to gain anything such as land or money from any of them; she simply plays the role of the submissive woman. But just like the “wezel” she is characterized as, her sneakiness and cleverness begin to emerge.

The entire plan she agrees to with Nicholas looks like a complicated way to fulfill sexual desires. However, this is Chaucer’s way of changing the role of women ever so slightly. In part, Alisoun is satisfying her libido in plotting with Nicholas, but she is also breaking the barriers John has placed on her. She could have simply arranged a rendezvous with Nicholas, but instead, she helps Nicholas set John up to look like a fool. She is a wezel, as Chaucer named her—stealthy, furtive and shifty. Her actions are not going to be direct and obvious, but rather subtle and clever in order to get the full affect. With the first man that tries to confine her, she succeeds in wreaking revenge. When John falls from the roof, the townspeople are there to see it:

The folk gan laughen at his fantayse;
Into the roof they kiken and they cape,
And turned al his harm unto a jape. (3840-3842)

Alisoun takes John’s biggest fear and weakness of being made a fool by his young wife and makes it a reality. She does not scream and yell at her husband like Alisoun of Bath; she simply takes her husband’s weakness and uses it to her advantage. It is clear, as Alisoun laughs at John’s folly that Alisoun was in fact, the wiser in the marriage and should have been treated with more respect by her husband. The game does not end here though; Alisoun has two more scores to even and Chaucer has two more lessons to teach through what appears to be the innocent Alisoun.

Absolon has irritated Alisoun for long enough and when he interrupts her evening of pleasure, she shows her wezel ways once again. Absolon asks for a kiss and she promises him one in return for him leaving her alone. Rather than abiding to his request, Alisoun devises a scheme that will not only assure her peace from Absolon, but also will humiliate him: “And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers./ But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers” (3733-3734). Absolon is humiliated, angered and repulsed by Alisoun’s actions. In turn, Alisoun marks herself another victory: “’Tehee’ quod she, and clapethe wyndow/ to,” (3740).

Alisoun has avenged herself of the two aggravators of her freedom. Like Alisoun of Bath, Alisoun in The Miller’s Tale rids herself of those that hold her back. Although such a tactic would not be used by proper Alisoun of Bath, it was perfect for Alisoun in The Miller’s Tale; after all, Chaucer did deem her the uncouth country girl. Chaucer certainly had these details of Alisoun in mind when he allowed her to provide such a raunchy stunt.
It would make sense if at this point, Alisoun’s short reign of terror came to a close. Although Nicholas did try to possess her, he also supplies reciprocity since she is gaining self gratification from him. Unfortunately, instead of applauding Alsioun’s astounding trick on Absolon, Nicholas makes it clear that he can do better: “This Nicholas was risen for to pisse;/ And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;” (3798-3799). The following punishment Nicholas receives adds a bit of curiosity as to who the disciplinarian is since it is completely out of Alisoun’s hands. The retribution was intended for Alisoun, but Chaucer changes the events: “And he [Absolon] was redy with hir iren hoot;/ And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot” (3809-3810).

This lesson is purely in the hands of Chaucer as he puts a new aspect on the way things should be where women are concerned. Through it all, Alisoun stands back and views the havoc she has participated in. She walks away unscathed, reputation still in tact and she laughs. Chaucer uses this woman that he intentionally creates to appear naïve and submissive and she essentially pulls clever tricks out of her hat to demonstrate her strengths and to show that she will not be owned.

Like Alisoun of Bath, Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale is successful in achieving her will where men are concerned. However, her means of achieving her goals are vastly different from Alisoun of Bath. While Alisoun of Bath uses her voice to attain her goals, the younger Alisoun uses her wits and stands back to survey her work with a quiet, “Tehee.”

“The Miller’s Tale is a narrative staging of the natural vitality and resourcefulness embodied in the ‘yonge wyf’ Alison—values that reappear, with a sharply different valence, in the Alison of Bath.”

69
The next strong woman that emerges in Chaucer’s tales is so vastly different from Alisoun of Miller that one certainly might question Chaucer’s intentions in the creation of the namesakes. While Alisoun of Miller creeps on the scene ever so quietly, Alisoun of Bath arrives like an unexpected clap of thunder, immediately speaking with an air of condemnation:

Experience, though noon auctoritee  
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me  
To speke of wo that is in mariage; (III, 1-3)

Bath’s strength of voice is one aspect that makes her a unique woman of Chaucer because unlike his other women, she does not sit idly by; she voices her opinions about men, women and the battle of the sexes. Alisoun of Bath is so extreme in this respect from Alisoun of Miler. While Alisoun of Bath glosses scriptures:

And many another holy man also.  
Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,  
That hye God defended mariage  
By expres word? (58-60)

and chastises other pilgrims for their interruptions: “‘Al redy, sire,’ quod she, ‘right as yow lest,/ If I have license of this worthy Frere’” (854-855), the timid Alisoun of Miller’s only two outcries are first against Nicholas, “‘Lat be, Nicholas,/ Or I wol crie ‘out harrow’” (I, 3285-3286) and the second is against Absolon, “‘Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool,’” (3708), but this is the only forcefulness heard from Alisoun of Miller. The manner in which each of these women achieves progress is completely opposite. Alisoun of Bath has a strong voice and she utilizes it to her benefit.

Even Alisoun of Bath’s appearance is so unlike the younger Alisoun. While Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale is described as “gent and smal” (3234), Alisoun of Bath is described as such: “Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe” (I, 458).
As a woman in a man’s world, Alice is unusually strong, tough and mannish, qualities she refers to as her ‘sturdy hardynesse’ (612). Chaucer alludes to this aspect of her outlook when he describes, in the General Prologue Portrait, her bold, red face, her spurs, and her hat shaped like a shield as if the wearer is ready for battle. It is as if Chaucer is suggesting that to survive and succeed in a man’s world, a woman like the Wife of Bath must assume some of the attributes normally associated with the opposite sex.  

Had it not been for the earlier creation of Alisoun of Miller as the beautiful, demure woman, it would seem that Chaucer is implying just what Brown suggests; that a woman must appear like a man to survive in a man’s world. However, we see a victorious, beautiful woman in Alice of Miller and this instead is Chaucer showing that women—all women—can be triumphant.

Alisoun of Bath also speaks out continuously against men, specifically her husbands, but just as the audience becomes convinced she is out to destroy the opposite sex, she changes her pretense and admits she found a sense of equality with her fifth husband. As some suggest, it seems Chaucer uses Alisoun of Bath to solve the problem of sex and marriage.

It is also evident that Alisoun of Bath takes little time to listen to others. Once she takes the stage there is no stopping her. When the Pardoner interrupts her to speak his concern, she takes no time to hear him, but immediately tells him to pipe down:

“No, dame,” quod he, “by God and by Seint John!  
Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.  
I was aboute to wedde a wyf; alas!  
What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?  
Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!”

“Abye!” quod she, “my tale is nat bigonne.  
Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,  
Er that I go,shal savoure wors than ale. (III, 164-171)
Alisoun of Bath is overwhelmingly vocal compared to the silent Alisoun of Miller.

While Alisoun of Miller retreats from the spotlight, Alisoun of Bath revels in the attention. It is true that Alisoun of Bath enjoys being the center of attention as Chaucer suggests in the General Prologue, “In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon/ That to the offrynge biforn hire sholde goon;” (I, 448-449). This woman makes sure she is not overlooked.

With all the mounting differences between the Alisouns it is likely to wonder what Chaucer’s intentions really were with these two women. A close inspection of the two women will exemplify that they have more in common than meets the eye. The commonalities between the women may not be extensive but they are dominant. Each exhibits selfishness, the need to satisfy self and to reign victorious over the men no matter what the cost.

To begin with, they both set out to satisfy their needs and they exert a sense of selfishness in doing so. Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale decides to satisfy her sexual desires with Nicholas and she is in cahoots with his wild plan. She realizes her husband, John, may get hurt in her quest, but rather than show concern for her husband, she exhibits concern only for herself lest she get caught:

“Myn housbonde is so ful of jalousie
That but ye wayte wel and been privee,
I woot right wel I nam but deed,” quod she. (I, 3294-3297)

Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale shows the same selfishness again when Absolon hones in on the scene. She is irritated and does not want to be bothered so she yells out at Absolon:

“Fo forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston,/ And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!” (3712-3713). Considering the prank yet to come, there is no doubt that Alisoun would carry out
her threat on Absolon. She wanted her peace and privacy and she would get it despite the
cost.

Alisoun of Bath is much the same. She marries old men so she can acquire their
land and money, in addition to making sure they satisfy her sexual needs: "'As help me
God, I laughe whan I thinke/ How pitously a-nyght I made him swynke!'" (III, 201-202).
She disregards their age and health and continues to push her husbands to extremes as
long as her needs are met. Her intensive concern for herself is displayed frequently in her
relationships with her husbands and she chatters on to her fellow pilgrims about it
thinking nothing wrong with her self absorbed behavior:

        But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
        And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
        What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
        But it were for my profit and myn ese? (211-214).

Her selfishness knows no bounds and she is quite proud of thinking of herself first and
foremost in all aspects of her life.

To each of the Alisouns, their behavior is not unique. They have followed the
example of men and they do not find their behavior shocking. Each is out to satisfy
herself even if it does require selfishness.

At first, the simplicity of name sharing would seem like nothing, but Chaucer
makes these two women dominant like no other women in his tales. This is not to say
that Chaucer wants women to reign supreme over men because he certainly does not.
However, selfishness and one sex reigning victorious may be uncommon to the audience,
but not because this is a unique topic; the only reason these scenes play out so originally
in Chaucer's time is because the hero is actually a heroine—a woman. Not once does
Chaucer show this, but twice. Prior to this, the man was always the vocalist, the hero, the
conquerer, while the women were pushed aside or made fools of. Chaucer does not go with the ordinary. He changes the roles and makes people take notice and question the status of women compared to men. And he goes to extremes with these two women.

At first glance, it would seem evident that the only attribute these women have in common is their name; however, although their means may be different, their end results are the same. It is not so strange that Chaucer would create such vastly different women to produce the same point:

A similar logic exists in Chaucer’s choice of a hag as the central female figure of the Wife of Bath’s Tale. For if, as Jerome and other writers suggested, a young and beautiful wife will be unfaithful, then it is sensible for men to marry old and ugly ones.\(^8\)

But Chaucer shows the two types of women and he shows that both types can be strong. Alisoun of Miller was evidently used to ease us into this new phenomenon of the strong woman. She arrives on the scene softly and produces a new realm for women. Chaucer then follows up with Alisoun of Bath to severely demonstrate his point. Both women show the injustices to the female sex and each takes a different approach to rectify the problem. Chaucer may use satire and the fabliau to prove his point, but it is clear that Chaucer sees the disparity in men and women and their relationships to one another. He sees the problem, confronts it and gives solutions to positive outcomes. Robert Payne is another critic who analizes the Wife of Bath and the strong figure head she is for women of Chaucer’s time.

But suppose Chaucer had given us exactly the same prologue and tale as we have for Alysoun of Bath, but described her as he describes Alisoun (after all, he did give the two women the same name) in the Miller’s Tale. Surely Alysoun of Bath’s feminist harangue would have grated far more harshly on both medieval and modern ears had it come from the seductive young country tease of the Miller’s Tale. Instead, we get the marvelous sentimental softening, which
in the end must have made medieval readers pause long enough actually to listen to Alice of Bath’s outrageous heresies.9

Instead, Chaucer gives us two women who are equally outrageous, but their traits have a different aura to create the tales that would leave an impression.

Chaucer displays throughout the rest of the tales the variety of interactions between men and women. However, Chaucer still does not seem satisfied with the raging battle between the two. With the Wife of Bath he suggest equality, but Alisoun still suggests sovereignty. However, in the Franklin’s Tale, as the next chapter suggests, we see a world that Chaucer would most likely be pleased with—men and women and equality between the sexes. This seems to be the example Chaucer is arriving at throughout the tales, although he has taught many lessons along the way.

It is evident that Chaucer did not believe in the assignment of specific roles for men and women. In fact, Chaucer not only exemplifies the strength of women, but he also demonstrates the equality that should be established in relationships. Next we will examine just how well Chaucer understands the sexes when we look at the men in the tales and how they fit into Chaucer’s tales.

1 Chaucer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 66. As noted previously, Kane studies the different personality types in Chaucer’s Tales. Kane believes it is Chaucer’s oversimplification of this Alisoun that creates her realness and makes the tale particularly enjoyable.  
2 Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Contest, (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 99. Knapp agrees that Alisoun’s behavior would be in conjunction with Chaucer’s time and audiences would expect it no other way. Even those who examine such texts take it for granted that this is the kind of behavior they would expect of women during that time frame.  
3 The initial impression Chaucer gives in the use of “wezel” is that of a small animal, but a closer look indicates Chaucer’s subliminal message being that of a tricky, sly rodent which inevitably describes Alisoun.  
4 Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Contest, p. 100.
5 Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) p. 285. Patterson studies the way in which Chaucer changes the stage for women and compares the differences between the Alisoun and how they still were so effective not only in the tales, but in society.

6 Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher, *The Age of Saturn: Literature and History in the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) p. 38. In this particular section the authors look at the “physical exertions of the body” in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*. They study the Wife’s physical make-up as well as her physical abuse on her husbands and the abuse she receives. The authors conclude, “Thus, in her prologue, the authority of man’s body affects the Wife of Bath chiefly through physical force. She attempts to counter such authority sometimes by using limited physical force on her own account, or by deceit, or through the manipulation of her own sexual appeal” (p. 40).

7 Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher, *The Age of Saturn*, p. 58. Brown and Butcher suggest there are three conclusions to be drawn from Bath’s Prologue and Tale. The first is that the topics the Wife discusses are a concern to all of society, the second is that “woman’s mentality is capable of being peculiarly all inclusive” and the third is the Wife is Chaucer’s way of addressing the problem of sex and marriage.

8 Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher, *The Age of Saturn*, p. 53. Brown and Butcher study the contradicting male attitudes within the tales. They also continue on to study the complexity of the Wife of Bath herself.

9 Robert O. Payne, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1987) p. 120. Payne studies the construct of the Wife of Bath and how strong of a character Chaucer made her. He continues on to briefly compare the two Alisouns and the different approach Chaucer took with each.
VI. The Other Half

It is evident that Chaucer is very generous with his opinion of women in his tales. In fact, Chaucer proves without a doubt, an understanding of the role that women played during his time and the role that women would soon step into if given the chance. Chaucer gave us the victorious, outspoken, clever woman, but he also gave us the subservient, domestic, obedient woman as well. Chaucer shows a true understanding of women during his time and the positions they were given and he depicts these women to perfection. However, Chaucer does not stop with the female sex. To show how Chaucer truly understood the sexes, it is pertinent that we also examine the male perspective on this particular subject, as depicted by Chaucer.

The different variety of men and their attitudes towards women are perfectly displayed throughout the tales through the pilgrims and the characters in their stories. The host, Harry Bailly, shows great respect and open-mindedness toward women, along with the Franklin who shows equality in a marriage and displays great respect toward women. In addition, there is still the age-old belief in the protection and salvation of a woman and Chaucer demonstrates this type of man through the Knight. There has to also be the man who is not open to a new age of thinking; one who is set in his ways. For this, we get the Friar. Finally, there is the Clerk who does not initially seem defensive regarding women. The different perspectives of these men comes out not only in their relations with the other pilgrims, but also in the tales they tell. All these men are created
by Chaucer to show the various attitudes of his time. While some of these attitudes are prevalent and obvious to a point, others give us a glimpse of Chaucer’s inner spirit hard at work for the evolution of relationships between men and women.

Harry Bailly is the first man whom Chaucer deals with somewhat at length. The audience is given a good idea for the Host’s character in the General Prologue and he immediately comes across as a likable man:

Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught,
And of manhod hym lakkede right naught.
Eek therto he was right a myrie man; (I, 755-757)

He possesses all the attributes of the typical man with his bold speech and learned mind; in addition, he is said to be a congenial individual who appears to be respected by those he comes in contact with. It is our Host, Harry Bailly, who concocts the tale-telling game and it is immediately accepted by the pilgrims. One of the first aspects of the game that is noticed is the fact that Bailly includes the women in the game. He could have easily excluded the women from the tales given that it was common practice for the men to disengage themselves from the women. However, Harry Bailly is sure to include them in the game as he encourages the Prioress to step up and place her lot:

“Sire Knyght,” quod he, “my mayster and my lord,
Now draweth cut, for that is myn accord.
Cometh neer,” quod he, “my lady Prioresse.” (837-839)

While Harry Bailly’s role is not overwhelming throughout the tales, it is prevalent enough for the audience to see him pop in and out of conversation with the fellow pilgrims. Chaucer uses this man to extend every amount of courtesy to the women and this is the first glimpse we see of how one of the men regards the women. Even when
there is a great deal of upset over the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and certain men are
mocking her, Harry Bailly steps in and tells the other men to listen to her tale:

   Oure Hooste cride, “Pees! And that anon!”
   And seyde, “Lat the womman telle hire tale.
   Ye fare as folk that dronken ben of ale.
   Do, dame, telle forth youre tale, and that is
   best.” (III, 850-853)

Whether the Host agrees with what the Wife of Bath has to say is not the issue; the fact
that he shows her and the other women a certain extent of respect speaks very highly for
him. He does not treat the women as if they know nothing or try to show authority over
the women, which was often done in medevial society. Harry Bailly gives the women
equal opportunity to be heard in the game of the tales and it is often the Host who jumps
to the defense of a woman if need be. He is continuously drawing the women into the
tale-telling and does not want them to be overlooked. Again, he speaks to the Prioress
and again, he shows every amount of respect to her:

   “My lady Prioresse, by youre leve,
   So that I wiste I sholde you nat greve,
   I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde
   A tale next, if so were that ye wolde.
   Now wol ye vouche sauf, my lady deere?” (VII, 447-451)

The Host assures the Prioress that he does not wish to offend her and this is a stance he
takes throughout their journey. He means no harm to anyone and even when ill words
are spoken among the pilgrims (as is the case with the Friar and the Wife of Bath), he
steps in and steers the conversation elsewhere.

This is not to say our Host was flawless in his ideas or opinions of women,
because when it comes to the discussion of his relations with his wife, he tells his fellow
pilgrims how she has a great deal of power over him. He begins by saying that he will be
“out at dore anon” if he is late or shows weakness:

For I am perilous with knyf in honde,
Al be it that I dar nat hire withstonde,
For she is byg in armes, by feith:
That shal he frynde that hire mysdooth or seith—
But lat us passe away fro this mateere. (VII, 1919-1923)

Though Harry Bailly may not directly tell women to show strength of character in their
relations to men, he does make it clear that he does not try to dominate his marriage; if
anything, it sounds as if his wife has the upper hand. The only other words Bailly
directly speaks regarding women is once again in his exchange with the Monk:

God yeve me sorwe, but, and I were a pope,
NAT oonly thou, but every myghty man,
Though he were shorn ful hye upon his pan,
Sholde have a wyf; for al the world is lorn! (1950-1953)

Here Bailly is telling the Monk that all men should have a wife simply for the joy of
procreation and for adding a strong generation to the nation. Although this could be
criticized for making women out to be good for only reproducing children, there are no
other negative connotations on Harry Bailey’s part to substantiate such an accusation. In
addition, the words of the Host seem more like a compliment to women by telling the
Monk men should have wives to share their lives with.

Chaucer uses Harry Bailly to show one viewpoint from a man regarding women.
Throughout the journey, Bailly displays the utmost respect towards women and is very
courteous and open minded in what they have to say. Although Harry Bailly is in no way
an extremist or even unique in the way he treats women, Chaucer does use our Host to
establish one type of attitude that was very deferential in regards to women. Creating our
Host to be this type of man shows Chaucer’s understanding of the male perspective as
well as almost suggesting the way women should be treated because it is Harry Bailly who appears continuously throughout the tales.

Much like the amiable Host, we are also given the Franklin who also is very respectful and enamored by women. But Chaucer uses the Franklin to establish the problems many men and women began to face in relationships. The Franklin addresses the problem of male empowerment over women in the opening of his tale:

And for to lede the moore in blisse hir lyves,
Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
That neveir in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al
As any loveye to his lady shal (V, 744-750)

Despite his position and the traditional role of men, the Knight (Averagus), in the Franklin’s Tale, agrees with his wife that they will have equality in their marriage.

Although equality in a marriage was not a new subject for these pilgrims since it was greatly discussed in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, Averagus is, however, the first man in the tales who suggests such a possibility. The Franklin takes a chance at being mocked by his male peers in the creation of such a tale when he suggests equality and camaraderie between husband and wife: “In the Franklin’s Tale, for example, a narrator drawn in part from romance attempts to revise the genre that defines him as a passive domestic figure, an anomaly among men.” Just as Chaucer created two new, strong women with the Alisouns, he seems to be creating a coming of age man with the Franklin.

With this new covenant of equality in their marriage, Averagus and Dorigen get on very well together and the Franklin provides a happy marriage with this new found equality for the audience to witness. It is not until Arveragus’ return that we see such
hopelessness and despair not only from Dorigen, but from Arveragus as well. Arveragus is shown completely torn up over the promise that Dorigen made with Aurelius and as much as it hurts him, Arveragus agrees that his wife must keep her promise, but he does not hide his feelings, “But with that word he brast anon to wepe” (1480).

Here again, Chaucer seems to take this opportunity to introduce a man who is able to express his intensive love for his wife and he shows that even the strong man can be emotional. Arveragus does not view his wife as his possession, but rather, his companion—an equal whose reputation is at stake and he does not want to see it spoilt due to his selfishness. Although Dorigen and Arveragus are married, Arveragus is more concerned with his wife’s honor than with his own pain over losing her. But Arveragus is not the only man who shows strength of character in this tale; Aurelius also exemplifies a higher standard of man. Aurelius sees Dorigen’s misery over leaving her husband and rather than claiming Dorigen as a mere possession, which was so common of the times, Aurelius demonstrates respect not only towards the sanctity of marriage, but towards Dorigen’s feelings:

I yow yresse, madame, into youre hond  
Quyt every serement and every bond  
That ye han maad to me as heerbiforn,  
Sith thilke tyme which that ye were born. (1533-1536)

Aurelius releases Dorigen from the commitment she made to him and tells her she is free to go back to her husband. He realizes that he does not want her against her will because he viewed her as someone to share his life with rather than a trophy to be had.

In this tale the Franklin offers two men who show understanding and respect towards women. In addition, we see the wide range of emotions from the male
perspective. Chaucer clearly shows extensive knowledge regarding the depth of feelings of a man for a woman as well as establishing a positive attitude toward women overall. The Franklin does not allow his characters to possess or control the woman in his tale. Quite the opposite, he gives them a freedom that is unique for the times along with the respect they deserve. While the Franklin may be by far the most contemporary of the pilgrims in his attitudes toward women, Chaucer does not stop here with the male characters.

Moving across the spectrum from coming of age to a more traditional, chivalrous man is the Knight. Very much like the Host and the Franklin, the Knight practices great respect towards women. However, the respect that the Knight creates in his tale maintains an air of dominance over women. The Knight begins his tale about “a due that highte Theseus” (860) and it is the Duke Theseus of which the tale and the various attitudes revolve beginning with how Theseus obtained his wife:

He conquered al the regne of Femenye,  
That whilom way ycleped Scithia,  
And weddede the queene Ypolita,  
And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree  
With muchel glorie and greet solemnyttee,  
And eek hir yonge suster Emelye (I, 866-871)

Right from the start we see a difference in the type of man Chaucer is trying to expose. Unlike the Franklin, the Knight is still a part of tradition and although he may show respect towards women, he does not participate in women’s quest for freedom (nor does the character of his tale, Theseus). While the Host keeps an open mind regarding women’s independence, the Knight is creating a character who is there to save women from the evil of the world. When Theseus encounters a town of women crying, he immediately takes up the cause to save them:
And swoor his ooth, as he was trewe Knyght,
He wolde doon so ferforthly his myght
Upon the tiruant Creon hem to wreke
That al the peple of Grece sholde speke
How Creon was of Theseus yserved
As he that hadde his deeth ful wel deserved. (959-964)

Chaucer gives the audience a traditional man who feels it is his duty to own and protect women. Although the Knight is in some contrast to the Host or the Franklin, it establishes strong evidence to prove that Chaucer was not only aware of the various types of men but also that Chaucer understood the different attitudes towards women.

Theseus has an overwhelming desire to constantly be in control, but he does take heed to what his wife has to say:

‘Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!’
And on hir bare knees adoun they falle
And wolde have kiste his feet ther as he stood;
Til at the last aslaked was his mood,
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte. (1757-1761)

After hearing all the women crying over the circumstance of Palamon and Arcite’s battle over love, the Duke agreed with the women that the men should not be punished for their feelings and Theseus’ anger abated. However, it is not long that the Duke puts aside his aristocratic authority. Even though his heart softens at Palamon and Arcite’s plight, his superiority and power is not questioned as he arrives at the solution to this problem. Theseus derives at a means that will greatly benefit himself when he tells the other two men they can go free, but neither of them can ever attempt battle on him. In addition:

This is to seyn, that wheither he or thow
May with his hundred, as I spak of now,
Sleen his contrarie, or out of lystes dryve,
Thanne shal I yeve Emelya to wyve
To whom that Fortune yeveth so fair a grace. (1857-1861)
The Duke uses Emily to consummate the deal and never once is Emily consulted on the marriage arrangements—Emily will marry whoever wins her in battle. The traditional man remains in tact when it comes to important decisions. There is no need for Theseus to consult anyone else regarding his decision including his wife or Emily because it is common practice for him to make life changing decisions regardless of whom they affect.

One last time, the Duke steps into the traditional role of aristocracy after Arcite dies. Since he was the victor of the battle with Palamon, he was to wed Emily, but he is thrown from his horse and dies. The Duke interacts once again and tells Emily she will marry Palamon instead:

‘Suster,’ quod he, ‘this is my fulle assent,  
With al th’ avys heere of my parlement,  
That gentil Palamon, youre owene knyght,  
That serveth yow with wille, herte, and myght,  
And ever hath doon syn ye first hym knewe.  
That ye shul of youre grace upon hym rewe,  
And taken hym for housbonde and for lord. (3075-3081)

Theseus is able to change his mind on whim and places orders which are readily received and accepted by those around him. The entire role of Duke is very customary in this society. Chaucer’s use of the Knight in the tales shows another perspective of man and how he relates to woman. Although it is clear the Duke is still very superior to women, he does display great respect and kindness to them. He does not use his powers negatively, but it is clear that he dominates relations not only with women but also within his kingdom. For Chaucer’s time, this role was very common and is yet another example of how Chaucer shows a great understanding of the male position in society.

Just from these three men, we witness Chaucer’s ability to create different character personalities. As Dinshaw notes “we can already see the suppleness of
Chaucer’s ideas of gendered poetics, the flexibility and complexity with which language and literary acts, gender, and power are interrelated."

Chaucer captures and develops a wide range of male characters and their attitudes. The behavior spans from the respectful Host, to the traditional Knight, all the way to the chauvinistic and unchanging Friar. “Chaucer presents a range of behavior that falls well within the expressive compass of his time. From the breadth of plausible actions, the poet consistently chooses moderation.”

The Friar is really the first extreme chauvinist we encounter in the tales and although he does maintain a certain attitude of respect towards women, it becomes clear that he still believes himself of a much higher status than the opposite sex. Immediately after the Wife of Bath finishes her prologue, the Friar jumps in with his air of condescension:

The Frere lough, whan he hadde herd al this;
'Now dame,' quod he, 'so have I joye or blis;
This is a long preamble of a tale!' (III, 829-831)

The Friar seems to suggest that all the Wife has previously said is of little importance and there is no need for her, a woman, to be speaking so freely or so long. However, he finds himself worthy enough not only to speak whenever he wants to, but also to mandate what is said. He is quick to judge the woman and even try to make a spectacle of her and what he regards as her ignorance, but the Summoner is just as quick to defend the Wife of Bath, even if he is just trying to goad the Friar, “‘Lo,’ quod the Somonour, ‘Goddes armes two!/ A frere wol entremetter hym everemo” (833-834). The Friar immediately takes offense to being opposed by the Summoner standing up for a woman. The Friar
does not like to be contradicted and believes his lower opinion of women is valid and practical. Once the Summoner openly counters the Friar and his opinions, the Friar threatens:

Now by my feith I shal, er that I go,
Telle of a somonour swich a tale or two
That alle the folk shal laughen in this place. (841-843).

The Friar does not like to be disputed or made a fool of, yet he is quick to do it to the women in his company.

The exchange between the Summoner and the Friar is a clear representation of the dueling types of men and their attitudes towards women. While the Summoner does not acknowledge elsewhere that he agrees with the Wife of Bath, he feels she is equally justified to voice her opinion and tell her tale. However, the Friar is still perturbed by the Wife speaking so openly and especially bothered by her subject matter. As soon as Alisoun of Bath finishes her tale, the Friar speaks up again, “Ye han heer touched, also moot I thee,/ In scole-matere greet difficultee” (III, 1271-1272). He also takes on a patronizing air by subtly complimenting, but then he makes sure to let her and the rest of the pilgrims know he has taken very little heed from what she has said, “But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,/ Us nedeth nat to spoken but of game” (1274-1275).

When the Friar speaks he expects all to take him seriously and to listen to what he says. However, he makes it very clear that what the Wife of Bath says has very little importance and she is speaking only in regards to the tale-telling game because as a woman, anything else she would have to say is inconsequential. The Friar goes so far as to tell her: “And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,/ To prechyng and to scoles of clergye” (1277-1278). Not only does he criticize the Wife publicly, but he also puts
himself on a higher pedestal by telling her to leave preaching to the ordained. Only men are ordained therefore, it is no coincidence on the Friar's part that all the ordained that publicly speak are men. The Friar is severely mandated by the old way of thinking that women should be seen not heard and when this is threatened, he immediately steps in to try to reinstate his conception of order. There is no room for the contemporary, strong willed woman where this Friar is concerned and he actually sums up what the stereotypical male believed in Chaucer's day.

A man like the Friar can not be condemned for his attitude toward women given that this was the traditional way of thought and since he was in a position of authority, his opinion was often heard. Chaucer also can not be condemned or called a misogynist for the creation of such men. To create all men like the Franklin would have made the tales unrealizable during his time and just like today, there was a vast number of opinions, ideas and attitudes concerning the role of women in society. Chaucer went beyond his contemporaries as it was in *not* creating all men like the Friar and providing a variation of men whose opinions are worth noting. While the Friar provides the loud arrogance of man's superiority over women, there is another man who sneaks on the scene.

One last male character that deserves close examination is the Clerk. Due to the content of his tale, of all Chaucer's characters he appears to be by far, the most misogynistic. The Clerk does not openly speak out against women nor does he blatantly insult women on pilgrimage. Even when the Wife of Bath publicly insults him, he says nothing. Initially, he seems to be one of Chaucer's lesser characters; quiet, inconspicuous and rather introverted. However, once given the stage, the Clerk creates the most extreme man imaginable when he introduces the pilgrims to the tale of Griselda and
Walter. Given the previous demeanor of the Clerk, it is important to look at the issues, which may have caused him to create such an extreme tale suggesting woman’s blind obedience towards her husband prior to calling the Clerk a misogynist. First a look at the tale, then the Clerk.

Much in keeping with medieval times, Walter chooses a wife and her father agrees with the marriage. Walter also imposes his standards on his bride and makes her promise to be faithful to him no matter what:

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevere ye to gruuche it, nyght ne day?
And eek whan I sey ‘ye,’ ne sey nat ‘nay,’
Neither by word ne frownynge contenance?
Swere this, and heer I swere oure alliance. (IV, 351-357)

The Clerk creates this marriage of convenience to go to extremes when Walter finds it necessary to test his wife’s promise to remain true to him. Walter asks Griselda to give up her first born and she obediently does so. She does not question her husband’s intentions because she was taught to obey him and she promised to do so prior to their marriage. Although Griselda has never given Walter reason to question her faithfulness towards him, he puts her to the test numerous times exhibiting his superiority over his wife to make himself feel better about his own insecurities. It may be Walter’s vacillating confidence in his wife that commences the testing of her, but this is not the point the Clerk is trying to make. The Clerk is clearly creating a woman of blind obedience towards her husband—a quality the Clerk saw lacking in women such as the Wife of Bath. It is not Walter’s cruelties that are focused on or even questioned throughout the tale; it is Griselda’s faithfulness to her word and her husband.
Even after asking her to give up her first born and seeing her do so complacently, Walter still finds it necessary to test her once again by telling her she must give up her second child. At this point, even the Clerk makes mention that there was no need to test Griselda’s loyalty, “O nedeless was she tempted in assay!/ But wedded men ne knowe no mesure” (620-621). The Clerk also says that married men know no bounds and Walter’s need to push his wife in order to show her loyalty continues to be an issue. Griselda never fails in her tests as she blindly obeys all her husband asks. Inevitably, Griselda is rewarded for her loyalty and patience.

While this tale may appear not only misogynistic, but garishly cruel to today’s audience, Chaucer’s audience most likely did not question the severity of the tale. It seems unlikely that the Clerk truly meant ill-will towards women in the telling of this tale. Knapp discusses the topic of nominalism and how it enters into Walter’s testing of Griselda.

In looking at what prompted such an extreme tale coming from one of the most inconspicuous pilgrims, it is important to note that the Wife of Bath created a rift between herself and the Clerk when she humiliated him publicly. The Clerk said nothing at the time, but it now appears he was waiting for his moment. He even makes direct mention to Bath at the end of his tale, “For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe—“ (1170). Although he may not have agreed with Bath, it does not necessarily mean that the Clerk believed all women should be as obedient to their husbands as Griselda was because the Clerk makes a point to mention twice that the tale is from Petrarch, not his own creation, “But forth to tellen of this worthy man/ That taughte me
this tale, as I bigan” (39-40). The Clerk also notes that his teacher never implied this is
how women should be in regards to their husbands:

And herkneth what this auctour seith therfoore.
This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Gridilde as in humylite,
For it were inportable, (1141-1144)

If the Clerk was as misogynistic as he inevitably appears, he would have omitted this
moral conclusion. However, the Clerk makes it clear that his tale is an allegory and he
continues on with Petrarch’s teachings and makes it clear that people should have blind
obedience to God. It is not to say, however, that the Clerk was not still aggravated with
Bath and truly trying to repay her follies. He made it clear that he disagreed with her
boisterous attitude toward all men and the need to be in control. While he may not be as
extremely misogynistic as he appears after this tale, he does lean toward the notion that
women should be subservient rather than independent. He was humiliated by Bath and
he took his opportunity to make it clear that women’s place in society (at his time) is still
at the lower end of the spectrum.

Chaucer developed a wide variety of men to establish the different character
personalities and attitudes towards women in his time. There is not one male character
that stands out more than the others in regards to their opinions (whether they be in favor
of women or not) quite like the Alisouns stand out, but this allows the audience to see
where Chaucer’s interest lies, in addition to Chaucer experimenting with the new role of
woman, compared to men. According to George Kane, “The balance of sympathy in
Chaucer's work as a whole favours women”10 and while it may be true that Chaucer’s
greater interest lies in the opposite sex, it is not to say that Chaucer did not give fair
treatment to men. Just as Chaucer depicted various personalities of women throughout
the tales, he did so with men as well. Harry Bailey, the Franklin, the Knight, the Friar
and the Clerk all have varying ideas on the role of women in society and how women
relate to men and these beliefs come out through the interactions with the pilgrims and/or
in the tales they tell. While their beliefs may not be in favor of the dominant women,
Chaucer makes sure all the characters maintain a certain level of respect towards them.
In providing the variety of man, just as Chaucer provided the different variety of women,
it is clear that Chaucer understood the sexes—their commonalties that bring them
together and the differences and the attitudes that divide them.

1For more information regarding the status of women during Chaucer's time, see chapter I. pp. 1-3 where it
is discussed that women were regarded on a very minor level and it was custom to leave them out of men's
interactions.
1995) p. 24. Singman and McLean study the attitudes of men towards women in the time of Chaucer and
they show that openness to women’s ideas and views was very much unheard of. The man dominated the
relationship and the woman was expected to sit silently and accept what he said or did.
3 Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, (Princeton, Princeton University
Press, 1994) p. 4. Crane looks at romance in the late Middle Ages, particularly in Chaucer’s works. She
sees his sympathetic view of men and women during this time. She also believes that his knowledge of
both parties stems, in part, to his personal experiences with romance.
4 This goes back to chapter one in which I discuss the custom of the father having complete control over his
daughter. It is up to the father to choose a husband for his daughter. In this case, Emily’s father is dead, so
as brother-in-law, Theseus steps into the role of caregiver and provider and is able to make this decision for
her. For more see Chapter I. The Medieval Place of Chaucer, pp.1-2 or Derek Brewer, Chaucer in His
Dinshaw discusses at length Chaucer’s ability to envision the difficulties the women of his time faced, but
in doing so, he has not let the male perspective fall to the wayside.
6 Carl Lindahl, Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales, (Indianapolis, Indiana
University Press, 1987) p. 35. Lindahl stresses that the society Chaucer worked with was much different
from today’s society and the “possibilities for action” were very different than compared to now. He feels
that Chaucer deals with issues of his time and does so by not going to extremes in any manner.
7 Grover Furr, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale and Nominalism: A Preliminary Study” Richard J. Utz, ed,
Literary Nominalism and the Theory of Rereading Late Medieval Texts: A New Research Paradigm (New
York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) pp. 135-146. Furr discusses the topic of recent criticism known as
nominalism in great length. According to Furr, “The study of the influence of nominalism on Chaucer’s
work represents an attempt to specify and extend the contemporary intellectual context to relate Chaucer to
the philosophic currents of his day, rather than assume he simply ignored them” (p. 135). Furr goes in
detail on how The Nun’s Priest’s Tale was influenced by nominalism, specifically looking at the free will
and determinism of Peregrine and Chauntecleer.
8 Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Contest, pp.129-140. Like Furr, Knapp studies Chaucer’s use of
nominalism and how it applies to The Clerk’s Tale.
9 See chapter III. A Close Look at the Wife of Bath pp. 9-11. This section introduces the controversy
between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath. For additional discussion on the topic see G.L. Kittredge.

10 George Kane, *Chaucer* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 66. Kane suggests that Chaucer’s “representations of masculine sexual selfishness and the misery it causes are numerous and cruel” p. 66. However, Kane goes on to say that Chaucer had a keen insight into men and women and the issues that affect their persons.
Conclusion

*The Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's intentions can not possibly be fully covered nor can they be completely understood. Therefore, arriving at a hypothesis that Chaucer created the independent, autonomous woman helps our understanding of Chaucer's work.

*The Canterbury Tales* is specifically formulated on the pilgrims and their attitudes on life and how they interact with one another. The pilgrims' personalities come out fully through the tales that each tells. It is through the pilgrims that we catch a glimpse of Chaucer and his own attitude and ideas regarding life. The creation of the wide variety of the pilgrims and the characters in their tales shows how well Chaucer understood people in general. We have studied the female sex and how Chaucer portrayed women and it is clear that while he knew how women were expected to act during medieval times, Chaucer had better ambitions for women. Chaucer created the strong, independent, free-minded women through the Alisouns and showed the audience a whole new realm for women. However, he does not abandon the submissive women, for the Griseldas and the Constances are still the prevalent role during Chaucer's time. In creating these subservient women, Chaucer is not condoning the stereotypical woman; he is simply showing that while the emergence of the strong woman may be imminent, it is slow coming.

Chaucer chose to create out of his world and offer a new type of personality from a woman that was not exemplary during medieval times. While the Alisouns did go to extremes (with Alisoun of Bath's promiscuity and boisterous opinions and Alisoun of *The Miller's Tale* caused harm for all the men), they became the first women in the *Tales*
that made the audience wonder about the place of women in society. The Alisouns seemed to be a type of experiment for Chaucer because in comparison, they are from two opposite ends of the spectrum; Alisoun of Bath is old and ugly, yet experienced, while Alisoun of The Miller’s Tale is young and beautiful, yet naïve. Although their make-up is completely different, Chaucer has each of their stories end victoriously allowing their strengths to dominate. In addition, after the creation of the vastly different Alisouns, Chaucer seems to find a happy medium of the prototype for women when he creates Dorigen. While Dorigen has her weaknesses, her strengths are also apparent and she also ends up triumphant and happy.

The traits found in these three women show the vast understanding Chaucer had of the female perspective regarding their position in society. However, while the role of the women is very important in the study of Chaucer, it is equally important to look at the role of men as well. Chaucer created such a unique variety of men it can not be doubted that he had a clear concept of the various attitudes of men toward women. The Host, the Knight, the Friar, the Clerk and the Franklin are distinguished in the way they interacted with fellow pilgrims and their ideas regarding women. Although Chaucer did not create all the men in his tales in a positive light as he did the Franklin with such generosity in his praise, respect and belief in equality for women, it does not justify accusations of misogyny; Chaucer was writing in the medieval period when women were worth little more than property and any other belief was considered as liberal.

Chaucer created a melting pot through the pilgrims. The numerous creations alone show his great understandings of men and women and their place in society as well as how they relate to one another. Chaucer understood the sexes. The levels of male
attitudes are greatly captivated and realistically portrayed. In addition, Chaucer reached beyond his realm and established respect, equality and strength for his women characters. For that concept alone Chaucer should be praised and critics like Pearsall, Patterson and Knapp agree. Unfortunately there remain those like Elaine Tuttle Hansen who found fault with Chaucer for not being a missionary on women’s behalf. It is to those critics that I agree with Chaucer when he simply said: “And if ther be any thyng that disples hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konnynge” (X, 1081).
Bibliography


