

Animalism in the Wife of Bath

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The Wife of Bath, a great creation by Geoffrey Chaucer, can be thought of as an animal force seeking gratification of its drives in the face of moral and rational restraints represented by the Church and the ethical world. These drives are reflected in the pursuit of sensual pleasures, "maistrie" in marriage, and the competition for dominance in many other aspects of life. The "preoccupation with or motivation by sensual, physical or carnal appetites rather than moral, spiritual, or intellectual force"⁽¹⁾ is in head-on conflict with the ethical and the moral world.

The conflict reveals itself not only in the external world but also in the consciousness or unconsciousness of Alisoun, as the Wife of Bath is called. In the external world, she perceives that "therefore no woman of no clerk is preyed,"⁽²⁾ and says with resignation "What rekketh me, though folk seye vileyne/ of shrewed Lameth and his bigamy?" (11. 53-54) Deep within her, we can detect a similar struggle going on when she says "I nyl envye no virginitee," (1. 142) a contradiction with her characteristic competitiveness. This paper examines the Wife of Bath from the aspect of animalism, tracing various ramifications of the irrational forces and their conflict with the moral and rational restraints. The subject of my study is limited to "The General

(1) "Animalism," Random House Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986)

(2) Geoffrey Chaucer, The Tales of Canterbury, ed. Robert A. Pratt (Boston: Houghton, 1974) 269, 1. 706. All further references to "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" appear in the text. All references to "The General Prologue" appear in the text with GP placed before the line number.

Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," excluding the tale told by her.

Prominent among the animal forces in Alisoun is her seemingly insatiable sexual drive, seen from her shockingly blunt admission of the desire for more and more sex. This "extreme preoccupation with the satisfaction of physical drives"⁽³⁾ is reflected in her attitude toward sex, in which she admits "I loved nevere by no discrecioun,/but evere folwede myn appetit" (11. 622-23). To follow her appetite, she argues vigorously that remarriage should be allowed, and extramarital sex does no harm to the spouse. Fundamental to these arguments is that genitals are not just for the discharge of urine or for procreation but also for pleasure. "Telle me also, to what conclusion/ Were members maad of generacion,/ And of so parfit wys a wright ywroght?" (11. 115-17) The question she asks should be seen in the light that she never loves any discretion, that is, any rational regulation.

To justify her having five husbands successively, she is vehement in her opposition to the idea that an individual should be married only once. King Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob are among those cited by her as having more than one wife and they are all wise and holy men. Marriage, so she argues, provides a kind of schooling. "Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,/ And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes/ Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly" (11. 44c-44e). As the corollary of this argument, she declares, "Of fyve husbondes scolei yng am I. / Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal" (11. 44f-45).

Another idea she tries equally hard to repudiate is that God commands virginity. Alisoun raises two reasons to support her stand. One is that it is but a piece of advice and "conseillyng is no comandement" (1. 67). The other reason is that "if ther were no seed ysowe,/ Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?" (11. 71-72) The second point is related to the idea that genitals are for procreation, an idea espoused by the Church, but scorned by her as inadequate to describe their functions.

(3) "Animalism," Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C. Merriam Co., 1971)

From her arguments, we can draw some inferences, known or unknown to her. The animal forces in her, while seeking their satisfaction, are running into some stumbling blocks posed by the Church. Jesus's reproof of the Samaritan who has five husbands comes vividly to Alisoun's mind. The conflict between the animalism and the rational restraints represented by Church teaching is evident in her eagerness to defend her five marriages. The second inference we draw is that Alisoun can not bring herself to argue against Jesus' teaching uncircumventially. God certainly wouldn't command virginity but this does not mean that a woman can have five husbands. The absurdity of her reasoning seems to be clear to her, but she still resorts to the circumvential method to justify her marriage record. It exhibits another aspect of the animal forces in her. Another inference to be drawn is that some ideas, though objectionable to her, can be used to defend her stand when she sees the need. She argues vigorously, for example, to show the inadequacy of the idea that genitals are just for procreation. But she takes it as a ground against the idea of virginity. Her contradictory attitudes can be seen as a blind attempt to defend her sexual indulgence. "And for to been a wyf he yaf me leve/ Of indulgence" (11. 83-84). The wish for sexual indulgence is behind each of her arguments.

Alisoun's liberal attitude toward extramarital sex brings into view another aspect of the animal forces. To ward off her husbands' possible grumbling, she would be the first one to accuse them of womanizing while they could hardly stand as a result of sickness. Thus, she can play the field and has many merry moments, free from the accusation of her husbands. Another technique she uses for having fun outside in the evenings is to do it under the pretext of espying their possible irregularities. If her wanton behavior is discovered, she would tell them, "Have thou ynogh, What thar thee rekke or care/ How myrily that othere folkes fare?" (11. 329-30). This argument seems to say, "When your sexual drive is satisfied, what does it matter if your spouse

has extramarital sex?" To defend this stand, she affirms that "He is to greet a nygard that wil werne/ A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;/ He Shal have never the lasse light, pardee" (11. 333-35). This argument, a shocking promiscuous attitude, regards sex as something to be freely given without doing harm to the spouse. The concept is reflected in her words "I wolde selle my bele chose" (1. 447).

This clearly promiscuous attitude and the idea that sex is something up for sale run on a collision course with the ethical and moral world, a conflict between the jungle rules and the normative codes. It is what Charles Muscatine calls "unblushing sensuality against emotional austerity."⁽⁴⁾ This conflict takes shape first in the supposed debate with some ecclesiastical codes, in which Alisoun tries to justify her stand on remarriage and virginity. Then it reveals itself in her response to the reading by the clerk Jankyn, her fifth husband, of the antifeminist materials.

Marital theology during the Middle Ages prescribes strict codes over sex. Views of St. Augustine and Peter Lombard, which represent the predominant view of the moralists and canonists then, can be briefly summarized as follows:

"Contraception is never allowed. Intercourse for the purpose of producing offspring is without sin. Intercourse as a preventive of adultery (claiming the 'debt') is venially sinful, as is also intercourse with one's spouse simply to gratify one's own pleasure."⁽⁵⁾

In a word, sex is aimed only for procreation, not for pleasure. This attitude is clearly opposite to Alisoun's open admission: "In wyfhod wol I use myn instrument/ As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (11. 149-50) and "Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe" (1. 152). Placing the animal forces as embodied by Alisoun in such an ethical world, a conflict as seen seething in her prologue is natural and inevitable.

(4) Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) 204.

(5) Joseph Mogan, "Chaucer and the Bona Matrimonii," Chaucer Review (1970): 125.

The Wife's use of the word "quoniam" is part of this conflict. Rodney Delasanta affirms that it "brings together her ecclesiastical preoccupations on the one hand and her sexual preoccupations on the other."⁽⁶⁾ Quoniam is the opening word of the final doxology of the Gloria, itself the preeminent hymn of praise in the opening moments of the Mass. Alisoun, however, uses this word to refer to her genitals, with clear blasphemy intended in it. "It is the Wife's paeon to pudendum, which in her own metaphor of the multiplied barley loaves of Jesus's miracle 'refreshed many a man.' (1. 146)"⁽⁷⁾ Sex takes on religious significance, with the liberal use of her sexual organs compared to the barley loaves. Here we can clearly see the incompatibility between these two. The mocking tone intended to show her protest against the Church's rigidity toward sex is unmistakable.

The conflict between the Wife and the clerk is that between Venus and Mercury. To borrow her own words, "Mercurie loveth wysdam and science,/ And Venus loveth riot and dispence" (11. 699-700). "And Venus falleth ther Mercurie is reysed. Therefore no womman of no clerk is preysed" (11. 705-06). In other words, the contrast between the two is that between rational restraints and animal forces. The animosity entertained by the clerk toward the woman is attributed by Alisoun to his dotage which failed him in any of "Venus werkes." So, in her mind, the rational restraints as embodied by the clerk are sort of emasculated and, thus, harbor prejudice against women. This reasoning is intended to degrade the rational force which more or less checked some indulgences of the irrational forces. The conflict between them can partially be seen in this light.

The clerk, a scholar or a college student in the Medieval Age is generally seen as representing certain restraint over the animal force. The "book of wicked wives" as read by Jankyn, a former clerk, constitutes part of the attempt to block the gratifica-

(6) Rodney Delasanta, "Quoniam and the Wife of Bath." Papers on Literature and Language 8.2 (Spring 1972): 204.

(7) Ibid. 205.

tion of animalism. The three anti-feminist, anti-matrimonial tracts contained in the book, irrational as they are in the eyes of modern people, are intended to scare young men away from getting married, and, thus, away from sexual indulgence. Jankyn, Alisoun's fifth husband, chooses to read the antifeminist stories in the hope of hushing her up. The restraining force exerts certain pressure over the Wife of Bath, an embodiment of animalism which seeks in every possible way the full realization of sexual impulses. "Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,/ Withouten oother compaignye in youthe" (11.460-61). The open conflict between these two forces flares up and reaches its climax in the tearing off of three leaves from the book. It is interesting to note that the flare-up leaves Alisoun deaf in one ear, a symbolic effect of the moral restraint on the animal force in a skirmish.

The animal force in the Wife is also seen in her "highly competitive urge in any endeavor she might undertake."⁽⁸⁾ This urge exhibits itself not only in clothmaking, in which she surpasses even the inhabitants of Ypres and Ghent, two cities in Flanders known for this craft. It also displays in church "offrynge." If any parish wife dares to go before her, she would get angry and "was out of alle charitee" (GP 1. 452). Her big "coverchiefs" are another indication that she would allow no woman to beat her in clothing. Her three pilgrimages to Jerusalem and her presence in Rome, in Boulogne, are just what she falsely accuses her husbands of saying: "And if the cattes skyn be slyk and gay,/ She wol nat dwelle in house half a day" (11. 351-52). These pilgrimages are intended by Chaucer to be nothing but "a-caterwawed" to show her "skyn," thereby reflecting another aspect of her mentality. Wayne Shumaker does not seem to understand this point while writing his much quoted article, "Alisoun in Wonder-Land: Study in Chaucer's Mind and Literary Method."⁽⁹⁾ Shumaker criticizes

(8) R.M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980) 119.

(9) Wayne Shumaker, "Alisoun in Wonder-Land: Study in Chaucer's Mind and Literary Method," *ELH* (1951): 77-89.

Chaucer of leaving Alisoun's three pilgrimages to Jerusalem and other trips abroad unreflected in her speeches and their effects unfelt in her behavior. Based on this reasoning, he affirms that characters created by Chaucer lack depth of mind.

Part of this highly developed competitive urge is her eagerness in gaining "maistrie" in marriage. She tries to subjugate her husbands by all means. While young and beautiful, she uses sex powerfully to achieve this purpose. When this means fails with her fourth husband, she "made hym of the same wode a croce" (1. 484). In the case of Jankyn, her fifth husband, she plays possum in a scuffle, forcing him into the concession she much covets. "He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,/ To han the governance of hous and lond,/ And of his hond also" (11. 813-15). To prove the value of conceding "maistrie" to women, she says that no dispute occurs between them thereafter.

Why is Alisoun so possessed by animal forces? This is a question which comes readily to the mind of each person who reads "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "The General Prologue." Chaucer leaves some clues behind. In appearances, "boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe" (GP, 1. 458) and "gat-tothed was she" (GP, 1. 468). To have the teeth set far apart, according to Medieval theories, is a sign of lasciviousness. Her bold face and red complexion strengthen the belief that she is a born sexually active person. Her mother's teaching suggests another possible source. While dallying with Jankyn, she cheats him into believing that "he hadde enchanted me, - -/ My dame (mother) taughte me that soutiltee (trick)" (11. 575-76). Alisoun herself attributes the "coltes tooth"--sexual desires, to her birthmark "of seinte Venus seel" (1. 604). To conclude, it can be safely said that natural endowments and her upbringing have a part in the shaping of her character.

Seen in the light of animal forces, some of Alisoun's bewildering behavior can be better understood. The credibility of her shockingly blunt admission of the desire for more and more sex, for example, may puzzle some readers if they examine her

from other angles. Looking upon her as an embodiment of animal forces may also provide some clues to the settlement of the controversy over whether she is an iconographic character. In The Tales of Canterbury, she is evidently an embodiment of animal forces and, hence, an iconographic character. Chaucer's attempts to give credence to this character, however, add new aspects to her. She, therefore, is regarded not merely as a representative figure, but also as a fascinating character in her own right.

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