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Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*

Question One: Self-Contradictions

There is a decided ambivalence in Alison of Bath's attitude towards marriage. "Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynogh for me/To speke of wo that is in marriage." So begins her prologue. "I pray to God, that sit in magestee/So blesse his soule for his mercy deere . . ." So ends the prologue. We might explain this dissimilarity simplistically by suggesting that the first condemnation is general, and that the last recommendation is specific--and this is certainly true. But we should also accept this self-contradiction as a self-contradiction, without attempting to explain it away. One of the great strengths of Alison is her realism, which is not to say she does not possess some comic elements nor display a certain literary tradition, but she is above all bursting with feral life. This life springs, to a great extent, from her seemingly unconscious self-contradictions. It not only makes her a real person, but also a real character--in the vernacular sense.

A second pattern of contradiction we find is her tendency to "humorise" and sermonise¹ at the same time. Though a useful stratagem, making the moral medicine go down with ease, it seems not so much a conscious plan of action as an essential part of

¹Poetic license here applied.

her character. This at once humorous and serious sermon permeates her tale also, for she tells us it is only for fun, yet it leads to the expression of her personal philosophy that extols feminine autonomy and authority.

This leads us to a brief examination of the most intriguing of self-contradictions. The wife of Bath is both Feminist whilst at the same time incorporating "anti-feminine satire," as the Riverside editor so succinctly expresses. Certainly she plays second fiddle to no-one, especially no man; she displays frightening autonomy; she represents marriage, at times, with a pragmatism bankers can only admire and emulate; she controls every man who unwittingly enters her realm of influence. Recognising that the autonomy provided ladies in Courtly Love is a gift of men--stemming, at least in part, from the practical and financial considerations of primogeniture, which effectively reveals that supposed autonomy as merely the principle tool of control--the wife of Bath drags that love from the court and reunites it with the body. The result is a feminist who remains partly attached to anti-feminist stereotypes. And so the best way to gain control of men is to treat them heartlessly; she acknowledges the value of virtue whilst playing the role of the unvirtuous; she uses sex as her primary weapon, though clearly sex is central to the problem. The wife of Bath's love philosophy, though now in control and free to wander, nevertheless originates in the Court and cannot entirely escape its own character.

The Wife of Bath Question Five: Long Prologue, Short Tale

If we accept for a moment the novel-like structure of *The Canterbury Tales*--irrespective of the temporal chasm separating Chaucer from DeFoe--with a group of characters not simply telling tales but *telling* each other, with interjection, praise and reproof, narrative comment, with internal reaction as manifest in the juxtapositional content of "The Millers Tale" and "The Reeves Tale," to specify only the most prominent, then we might also accept the deconstructionalist thesis that the tales are, at least for the moment, a device of characterisation.

This notion introduces the overriding principle that explains the disparity between the relative sizes of the wife of Bath's prologue and tale, and that is the essential difference between the direct and the indirect, the implicit and the explicit. In simple terms, Alison of Bath is too big a personality to be fully revealed by the implicit messages of any tale she might tell. At best we might have a vague idea of who she is, but Alison of Bath is too bold for such vagaries: she must speak for herself and she must speak of herself. The bigness of Alison of Bath lies both in her complexity, incorporating converse characteristics, as well as her strength of opinion, and it is this sex centred authority concomitant opinion which needs not only a direct voice, but the voice of *confession*, and how else might we justly describe her prologue. It is in the intonation of confession that the sincerity of her convictions speak louder than the laughter, for her comic self-representation is in many

respects only a guise.