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INTERPRETATIONS OF FEMALE AUTHORITY IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

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ENGL 445F Rise of Vernacular Culture

Abstract

Beginning with *Romance of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun in 1269, Medieval authors give allegorical characteristics to women defining what a Medieval woman is, who she should be, and how she should behave. This text becomes a rule book on courtly love and male and female behavior lasting for centuries and is borrowed by authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, who used *Romance of the Rose* as a reference to question female authority in many of his works. Therefore, it is through an understanding of characters such as the Old Woman from *The Romance of the Rose*, Criseyde from *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Alisoun from “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” that we are able to shed light on the level of sovereignty women had in the Middle Ages and how they may have achieved that level.

Olivia Havlin
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Interpretations of Female Authority in Medieval Literature

“So it is naturally with the male and the female; the one is superior, the other inferior; the one governs, the other is governed; and the same rule must necessarily hold good with respect to all mankind” (*Politics*). This Aristotlean quote from *Politics* is just one example of a quote that would prove to be a thorn in women’s sides throughout history. However, Aristotle was not the only one with an anti-feministic view of women. Literature is full of speeches demonizing women, and it is often because of these speeches and other writings that history has seen women as sources of evil in the world. In such examples, we are presented with a duality; the confined versus the unconfined woman and what they mean to society. The problem with the confined versus unconfined woman in these texts is that the unconfined woman is seen as dangerous and society demonizes her. She undermines traditional gendered behavior and shows that she can take on the same responsibilities that men do. Generally, confined women in these texts are peaceable, well-liked or respected, and do not cause any conflict in the story. The free or unconfined woman, however, is often the source of tension and the plot revolves around discovering and eliminating her. So, it begs the question, how much agency did Medieval women actually have? When concentrating on the characters of the Old Woman from *The Romance of the Rose*, Criseyde from *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Alisoun from “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” we can see that these texts offer a glimpse into the different roles of women and what was expected of them; and it is through an understanding of this literature that we can shed light on the level of sovereignty women had in the Middle Ages.

Literature can provide a window into the lives, thoughts, and actions of women during different periods, reflecting real life attitudes and behaviors. In her book *Inventing Womanhood*, Tara Williams credits the plague and the peasant uprising for the upward mobility of women in

the late fourteenth century, noting that women were gaining more economic prospects, greater access to religious authority, and a greater degree of choice in marriage (Williams 3). It was because women were gaining this power that writers like Geoffrey Chaucer experimented with new ways of imagining and representing women's lives and experiences. According to Williams, two significant aspects of this were the coinings of new gendered terms, *womanhood*, and *femininity* (3). Before this, the most common ways of classifying women were the model defined by marital status – maiden, wife, or widow, or the model based on religious types – the perfect Virgin Mary versus the sinful Eve. *Womanhood* proves to be a popular label because of its ability to negotiate different categories, such as secular and sacred, wife and mother, or female saint and courtly lady.

At the very beginning of *The Romance of the Rose*, we meet a series of players who have negative character traits, such as Idleness, Envy, and Poverty, to name a few, and all of these characterizations are women. These characterizations, among others, lay the foundation for what Medieval society expected of women and shows us how the Medieval Era perceived them. The widowed Old Woman, or *La Vieille*, from the *Romance of the Rose* acts as our secular and courtly lady and functions as a teacher to Fair Welcome, who is locked in a tower to keep the Rosebud, or the dreamer's desire, safe from the Dreamer. Fair Welcome serves as the point of access to the Rosebud and is, at first, open and warm to the Dreamer until Rebuff and his cronies kick the Dreamer out and imprison Rose and Fair Welcome in a tower. When Evil Tongue dies, and can no longer spread rumors to fuel Jealousy, False Seeming, and Constrained Abstinence urge the Old Woman to talk to Fair Welcome. They want her to convince Fair Welcome that the Dreamer "has a most noble, courteous, and generous heart" and that "he loves [Rose] very

much” (Meun 191). They beg him to allow the Dreamer in and to “hide him, or to allow him to go there without any suspicion” (191).

As soon as the Old Woman approaches Fair Welcome we are told that he did not want to speak to her because “he did not know whether she spoke the truth or lied,” and that he “did not trust her in the slightest,” (194) adding that Fair Welcome “had always been afraid of the senile old whore” (194). The belief that older women were untrustworthy and “senile old whores” was not new in the thirteenth century, but by putting it in writing, in a text that people would read far and wide, Jean de Meun solidifies how old women should be seen and treated, as well as how they should behave. The fact that Fair Welcome has no good thoughts about the Old Woman shows us the misogynistic side of this literature. On the other hand, the Old Woman goes on to tell Fair Welcome of her exploits as well as how to get a lover, keep him, and dismiss him. In her aged wisdom, she is a teacher and a voice for women and sets the stage for how a woman should behave in courtly love.

Fair Welcome must listen to the Old Woman, whether he wants to or not, while she boasts about her own reputation and experience, and says, “As you know, my reputation is such that you will never be reproached or shamed for taking anything that I may give you” (Lorris & Meun 196). Even though he wishes he could deny the Old Woman attention, Fair Welcome knows that he *does* profit from listening to her because he and Rose are in a situation that the Old Woman has been in before. At one point the Old Woman tells Fair Welcome her intention after feeling defeated by her old age and her lack of suitors, she says, “the only way I can avenge myself is by teaching my doctrine. Therefore, fair son, I will instruct you, so that when you are instructed, you will avenge me upon that riff-raff, for, God willing, when the time comes, you will remember my words” (Meun 198). Through Jean de Meun, the Old Woman is an authority

on love and relationships both within the story *and* in real life. This text becomes a rule book on courtly love and male and female behavior that will last for centuries and is not only emulated by *real* people, but also by authors like Geoffrey Chaucer who used the *Romance of the Rose* as a reference to question female authority in many of his works.

According to Britannica.com, “the original *Roman* is the most important single literary influence on Chaucer’s writings. In it he found not only the vision of idealized love (fin’ Amor), to which he was constant from youth to old age, but also the suggestion and poetic example for much of the philosophizing, the scientific interest, the satire, and even the comic bawdry found in his most mature work” (Britannica). Chaucer used the *Romance of the Rose* as a reference for his works more than any other writer. An example of this adoption is the character of Alisoun in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” who we learn is not an original character. Chaucer's version of the Wife of Bath appears to originate in this earlier French poem. He uses, sometimes verbatim, lines from the text to illustrate Alisoun’s story in the “Prologue.” Like the Old Woman, Alisoun from “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” has been married numerous times, she knows the art of manipulation, and engages in a confessional monologue revealing her techniques and innermost secrets.

The “Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue” is centered on determining what women want. It was common for a woman in Medieval society to marry at a young age, and it was often an arranged marriage for monetary or political purposes.¹ This is true for Alisoun. In her “Prologue” she tells us, “sith I twlf yeer was of age, ... housbondes at chirche dore I have had five” (WoB III. 4-6). Many women in Medieval society were discriminated against and were called whores

¹ “The opinion of privileged women regarding their potential partners was often not consulted in matters of marriage; marriage for love was, insofar as it occurred at all, associated with the non-propertied class. Although by law aristocratic girls could not be married until they had reached puberty, set at 12 years of age, they could be betrothed as early as seven years old. Sometimes, of course, the needs of the families coincided with the tastes of the couple: arranged marriages did not preclude affectionate bonding” (Amtower 84).

for being promiscuous outside of marriage.² According to James A. Brundage in *Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law*, "A whore is one who is available for the lust of many men," adding that it is possible to be promiscuous without being a prostitute (Brundage 827). Alisoun is a woman in thirst of attention, not only sexually, but as a person as well. Since we know that Alisoun boasts of her promiscuity, and then defends it by misinterpreting the Bible,³ we can assume that society judged her and possibly called her a whore. We may also surmise that she was in search of a new husband so that she could enjoy a man's company without facing persecution because people believed that marriage was a virtuous responsibility. Alisoun seems to have been trained to think of herself as an object of desire for what a man wants, and in part, believes that a portion of her existence is to be such an object. Her "Prologue" and tale represent her desire to enforce what she wants, which is to not be considered a whore for being promiscuous, and also to have the power to make her own choices.

After hearing "The Clerk's Tale," wherein a wife is tested and mentally abused by her husband, the Wife of Bath claims that clerks are women-haters,⁴ and would never speak well about women. This opinion most likely comes from her most recent ex-husband, Janekyn, who seemed to have a deeper love for his book of "wikked wyves" than he did for Alisoun. Alisoun is an unconfined woman and openly flaunts her wealth and agency, just as a man would. This frightens and intimidates men because women who have freedom and power are considered dangerous since "their power does not conform to any sanctioned model, secular or spiritual." (Williams 2). The Wife of Bath goes on to defend all married women from the hateful things that

² "Adult women who remained unmarried were considered an anomaly, and anomalies do not generally garner much approval in conservative societies" (Amtower 83).

³ Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones, / Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man, / Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan: / `Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,' quod he, / `And that ilke man that now hath thee / Is noght thyn housbonde,' thus seyde he certeyn (WoB III. 14-19).

⁴ For trusteth wel, it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves, / But if it be of hooly seintes lyves, / Ne of noon oother womman never the mo. (WoB III. 688-91)

are said about them in a storm of frustration, noting that “folk of wyves maken noon assay, Til they be wedded – olde dotard shrewe! – And thanne, seistow, we wol oure vices shewe (WoB III. 290-92). Further, she questions the fact that men believe they have the authority to write in women’s voices when she says:

Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.
Than all the male sex could set right.

(Wob III. 692-96)

What she means is that for centuries women have been written and characterized by men. Men put words in women’s mouths, make them do evil things, and generally demonize them. Alisoun is asking what if women wrote stories in their *own* voices? Further, what if the power was switched and it was the *women* writing about men? She adds that if women had written the stories, they would have told stories from their point of view, thus telling the truth about men instead of writing them as heroes and saints, as men do. This concept is an irony because Chaucer is a man writing about a woman. So, what is it that he is trying to say? Is he attempting to inspire more women to write? After all, he did write in the vernacular, and his writings were meant for lay people. Or, is he sending a message to men that the way they wrote about women was all wrong, and that in writing a character like the Wife of Bath, he’s attempting to show that women do have a voice and sometimes it’s not perfect like Griselda’s from the “Clerk’s Tale?” Using her presumed authority, the Wife of Bath indirectly sets an example, allowing women to take a stand to fight the injustices and double standards that were imposed on them.⁵ In writing

⁵ One example of a double standard is “that beating of a disobedient wife was an acceptable practice; Jankyn, who beats the Wife of Bath so badly that she loses her hearing in one ear, would not be perceived as an ogre by Chaucer’s original audience. It was a husband’s right to correct a disobedient wife” (Amtower 83).

these female characters, was Chaucer trying to give women a voice and advocating for more freedom for women? Or, he could simply have written Alison as a means of comedy, because she's funny and boisterous and unusual.

One way of looking at it is that Alison is right; experience does give her authority. Those who write about marriage are often members of the church who have little experience in marriage or who have an agenda to paint a picture of the perfect wife as being like the Virgin Mary. However, having had five husbands gives her more experience; she knows more about the process of marriage, putting herself out there as a marriageable person, divorcing, and losing husbands to death. She is now the wise teacher from the *Romance of the Rose*. Or perhaps, the Wife of Bath is not the exemplar of agency because her tale alludes to the fact that women do not have agency, and that is what she wants in both her "Prologue" and her tale. For example, in her tale, Gawain's answer to Guinevere about what women want is, "My lige lady, generally," quod he, / "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above" (Wob III. 1037-40). Further, she states in her "Prologue:"

And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,
And that he seyde, `Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat' –
After that day we hadden never debaat"
(Wob III. 817-22)

Additionally, in her example of her last marriage, we can see that she struggled with gaining her own agency. In fact, it wasn't until her husband hit her that she freed herself from that marriage. However, her ability to free herself from that marriage rested on the fact that Janekyn felt guilty for having hit her. When she says, "O! hastow slayn me, false theef? / And for my land thus hastow mordred me?" Janekyn allows her to leave with her wealth (Wob III.

800-01). One way of looking at it is that if she hadn't encouraged him to hit her, then she would still be in that marriage. In other words, she purposely angered Janekyn by throwing pages of his book into the fire, knowing he'd lash out and act his vengeance upon her. Is this manipulation because Alisoun knows that the only way to get out of her marriage is to make him do something he regrets or is it a coincidence? After all, he has a reputation to look after as well. Just as Alisoun needs to keep the image of a good wife, so too, does Janekyn need to hold onto the image of a good husband.⁶ If he gives her what she wants, sovereignty, then she won't spread rumors about him being an abusive husband and he, too, will be able to remarry. Thus, her agency only comes from manipulation.

Chaucer borrowed from other writers as well, such as Giovanni Boccaccio. One work that he adapted was *Filostrato*, the story of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which is a story that has gotten a lot of flak from critics through the years, with one writer, Robert Henryson, and his *Testament of Criseyde* having a lasting impression on readers. Henryson "shows her as a street-walker and inflicts her with leprosy as a punishment for her sins" (Graydon 142). Others say that Criseyde acted "meanly and unfairly" and is a "false inconstant whore" (143) because she didn't go back to Troilus, and instead fell for Diomedes.

However, she deserves more credit than these critics give her. Taking a few cues from Pandarus (who in this story can be compared to the Old Woman because he advises Criseyde on love), she becomes involved in a relationship with Troilus that she had little choice in. Pandarus manipulates her into having feelings for Troilus, telling her that the only way to save Troilus' life is if she loves him back.⁷ After a long monologue, she convinces herself that though it would be

⁶ "The husband manifested his love by taking care of his wife and restraining from abusing her, while the wife manifested her love by her meekness and complete obedience" (Amtower 84).

⁷ "But for to save his lif, and ells nought, / And to noon harm of yow, this am I driven; / and for the love of God, that us hath wrought, / Swich cheer hym dooth that he and I may liven!" (*Troilus II*. 575-578).

improper to be in a relationship with Troilus, it would be an honor to strike such a deal with him for the good of her social standing and for the good of his health.⁸ This shows that she is not only worried about herself but that she is also considering Troilus' health, proving that she is not going into the relationship for purely selfish reasons.

Additionally, she worries about her position if she turns him down, noting that he is the king's son and that he might scorn her, which would put her in a worse position than if she were to have an affair with him and she does not wish to bring hatred upon herself.⁹ This sounds like a woman who is looking out for her best interest and is genuinely worried about her future. It also hearkens back to *The Romance of the Rose*, when the Old Woman tells Fair Welcome, "if you wish to choose a lover, I advise you to give your love to the handsome young man who values you so highly, but let it not be too firmly fixed" (Meun 202). She also tells him to love others with discretion and to tell each lover, "you alone will have the rose, and no one else will ever have a share" (202). Further, The Old Woman warns Fair Welcome that men are deceivers, saying that they are "ready to indulge their lusts with everyone, and we should deceive them in our turn and not set our hearts upon just one of them. It is a foolish woman who gives her heart in this way" (204). If Criseyde is living by this knowledge, then she is guarding herself against being hurt and abused by using the small amount of power that she has.

Given this information and knowing that Criseyde is carefully weighing her options and looking out for her best interest, we can see that the relationship with Troilus is one-sided and is based solely on sex with little to no emotional substance besides Troilus' claim of love, which is unsubstantial because, in reality, he knows nothing about Criseyde. It's no wonder she breaks her

⁸ "Al were it nat to done / to graunte hym love, yet for his worthynesse / It were honour with pley and with gladnesse / In honestee with swich a lord to deele, / For my estat, and also for his heele" (*Troilus* II. 704-07).

⁹ "he myghte have me in dispit, / Through which I myghte stoned in worse plit. / Now were I wis, me hate to perchance, / Withouten need, there I may stoned in grace?" (*Troilus* II. 711-14).

promise to Troilus and falls for Diomedes, who values her opinion and is sympathetic to her emotions.¹⁰ Joseph S. Graydon reflects this thought in his essay “Defense of Criseyde” who believes, “that her desertion of Troilus is justified and that the comments on her conduct and appraisals of her character are generally unintelligent or unfair” (Graydon 145). Especially since he is only concerned with himself and constantly tells Criseyde that he will die if she doesn’t come back as promised, threatening “if ye be unkynde,/ and but ye come at day set into Troye,/ ne shal I nevere have hele, honour, ne joye” (*Troilus* IV. 1440-42). During their last night together, Troilus never makes any inquiry as to Criseyde’s thoughts or feelings, but instead is only concerned that he is hurting. It almost seems as if he knows that Criseyde is not as in love as he is because he does not trust her to make good on her promise to come back and tries to persuade her to run away with him, which she logically declines adding that they would regret it.

Chaucer appears to be aware of the possible slander coming her way and worries that Criseyde’s reputation will not fare well in history. As Graydon notes, “The writer’s determination to defend the lady’s reputation; to assault, if I may say so, the entrenched line of century-old slander, is strengthened by the recollection of the poet’s rebuke and warning to her detractors of earlier days” (Graydon 145). He notes this pivotal passage of Chaucer defending Criseyde, “Allas, that they sholde evere cause fynde/ To speke hire harm! and if they on hire lye,/ I wis, hem self sholde han the vilanye” (*Troilus* IV 19-21). There is the added notion that women always have to explain themselves for their behavior, while men do not. The fact that a woman is not allowed to have multiple lovers is a double standard that men (and women) take advantage of in order to demonize women. If we could hear Criseyde’s point of view, what would she say? Would she say she left Troilus because she wanted to hurt him on purpose? It

¹⁰ In lines 118-175 Diomedes offers Criseyde friendship and tells her that he’s sorry for her sorrow.

seems unlikely, since she did not come to that decision immediately, but was distraught upon leaving Troilus. Instead, she probably didn't return to him because of self-preservation. Also noteworthy is that, in a sense, Criseyde is only going by the advice of the Old Woman, who says that one of her ten "Love Commandments" is to "bestow your heart in several places, never just in one, and neither give it nor lend it but sell it very dearly and always to the highest bidder" (Meun 201). Criseyde is selling her heart to the highest bidder; she knows she is safe with Diomedes and he appears to care for her more than Troilus.

One could even say that Troilus ruined her reputation, for in book I, Pandarus describes Criseyde's good standing and warns Troilus not to ruin her good name when he says, "require naught that is aynns hyre name" (*Troilus* II. 902). It is this relationship with Troilus that brings her such negative attention. If Pandarus had never pressured her to appease Troilus, her good name would have remained intact, and she still would have ended up with Diomedes, which is something Criseyde is also aware of. In book four of *Troilus and Criseyde*, she acknowledges letting Troilus down and bemoans her fate, saying "No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende/... Throughout the world my belle shal be ronge!/ And women most wol haten me of alle,/ Allas, that swich a cas me sholde falle!" (*Troilus* V. 1060-64). These examples of self-awareness do not show up in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, and since Chaucer is known to have been a satirist, it begs the question, is Chaucer genuinely worried about the fate of Criseyde, or is it all satire and he knows that he is essentially feeding Criseyde to the dogs?

Given the rules of courtly love, it can be said that the Old Woman, the Wife of Bath, and Criseyde are not evil or acting with evil intentions. Criseyde was not a bad person or an evil woman because she was doing what she had to do, and that is a double standard. Men are free to sleep around without facing repercussions or damage to their reputations. However, if a woman

behaves in a way that is opposite of the image of the perfect wife, then she is considered wicked and evil. Consider May from Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale." She married at a young age to a much older man and likely had no say in the match since most Medieval marriages were arranged.¹¹ Now consider Alisoun from "The Wife of Bath's Tale." One of the first things she says in her "Prologue" is, "For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,/ Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,/ Housbondes at chirche dore I have had five" (WoB III. 4-6). When May and Alisoun's husbands die, they would feel societal pressure to remarry, for an unmarried woman in Medieval society was considered unattached and whorish.¹² Criseyde and Alisoun are not only following traditional rules of courtly love, but they are also following societal rules.

As Corinne Saunders points out in *Chaucer, Women, and Romance*, "women were patrons, owners, occasional writers, and, most of all, readers of books" (Saunders 17). Further, it is clear that many of them read secular books, with French writings, like the *Roman* and other romances being "the second largest generic grouping amongst women's books in the Middle Ages as a whole" (Saunders 17). She adds that many books were read aloud in large groups, similar to how Pandarus finds Criseyde and her friends, who upon being asked, tells him, "This romaunce is of Thebes that we rede" (Troilus II. 99-105).

Since books were so popular among women, and Chaucer wrote in the vernacular for common people, it does seem as if Chaucer is sending a message of some kind about women and what they desire. As explained by Pricilla Martin in *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and*

¹¹ "As a result of arranged marriages involving exchange of property, many couples did not wed for love, or even for sexual attraction. Marriages were not infrequently loveless, unhappy affairs and this frustration is reflected in a popular saying of the times: "No man marries without regretting it" (Richards, 34). Only among the lower classes did people marry consistently for reasons of love or sexual desire. In general, however, peasant marriages were not common, as there was little need for a formal exchange of property among the poor." Brown.edu: Decameron Web.

¹² "Apparently it was difficult for the community to countenance a widow living under one roof with a young man who was her servant, whereas as her husband and master he was socially acceptable, and the liaison legitimized. Widows' remarriage, therefore, should be seen largely as a response to covert seigneurial and community pressures" (Franklin 203).

Amazons, “one could construct a feminist or a sexist Chaucer using essentially the same evidence from his writings (Martin xiii). In reality, we may never honestly know what Chaucer’s purpose was in writing these tales, for it is impossible to convey an original meaning from our present political and prejudiced position. We must make of it what we can, given our own experiences and interpretations. However, one can say with confidence that one of Chaucer’s favorite subjects was women, the relationships between the sexes, and the woes of marriage and power struggles. Either way you look at it, Chaucer appears to have been genuinely interested in what women wanted, and his ideas of what they wanted have transcended lifetimes.

Thus, in conclusion, I tell you, dear friend, that simplemindedness has prompted you to hold such an opinion. Come back to yourself, recover your senses, and do not trouble yourself anymore over such absurdities. For you know that any evil spoken of women so generally only hurts those who say it, not women themselves.

(McWebb, Richards)

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.