

‘For myn intente nis but for to pleye’- The Wife Of Bath, A Comedienne**Par Excellence****Bhavna Kale**

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ABSTRACT

Comedy has remained predominantly a male bastion across cultures and ages. The paper interrogates the apparent absence or a rather negligible presence of women as generators of humour. It takes cognizance of the fact that the image of the comic artist with all the bodily manifestations associated with the production of humour such as discomposed posture, loud raucous sounds etc. seem to contradict the traditional notions of femininity. Various studies across different communities of the world have shown how the gendered notions of comedy have been intrinsically interwoven with the concept of (im) morality especially where it concerns female comic artists. Chaucer's Wife of Bath challenges not only staid morality and religious orthodoxy but also offers an unparalleled comic tour-de-force which subverts all conventional notions of women and comedy. The paper demonstrates how Chaucer, much ahead of his times, circumvents the orthodox medieval context to create an immortal comedienne who would offer any modern day female standup comic artist a very tough competition. It also attempts to explore those psychological traits in the Wife which endow her with comic wit that renders all gendered categories of humour superfluous.

Key Words: femininity, humour production, comic artist, psychological studies, gender

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Comic performers such as jesters, clowns, story tellers and modern day standup comedians have always been popular throughout history and across cultures. However, the world of comedy has remained, more or less exclusively, a male bastion for varied reasons.

The Restoration dramatist William Congreve has traced the cause of women’s “incapacity to be funny” to certain emotional and biological factors:

“I must confess I have never made any Observation of what I apprehend to be the true Humor in Women. Perhaps Passions are too powerful in that Sex to let Humor have its course; or may be by Reason of their Natural Coldness, Humor cannot exert itself to that extravagant Degree, which it does in the Male Sex”.¹

Kathleen Rowe, on the other hand, observes “the cultural preference for women’s tears over their laughter and imagining them as generators of comedy is seemingly at odds with the traditional notions of femininity”.² The numerous physical manifestations of being a female comic artist - face contortions, loud sounds, discomposed female body - concomitant to a loss of self-control - all seem to shatter the conventional ideals of beauty and romance traditionally projected onto women.

This perception of an association between women’s talent for comedy and a certain lack of morality has also been observed by Regina Barrecca in her study of gendered linguistic usage in various communities across the world:

“In communities throughout the world women who tell jokes are regarded as sexually promiscuous”.³

Therefore, a witty, outspoken female performer who claims all the privileges of free and profane speech has often been seen as a direct challenge to social and moral order. Even the present day comediennes such as Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey and Joan Rivers who address several social taboos and controversial issues such as racism, sexism and religion have had to often contend with charges of profanity and obscenity.

Viewed against this rampant prejudice against female wit across ages and cultures, Chaucer’s creation of Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, as far back as the 14th century is indeed commendable. As a comic narrator she could easily offer any modern day standup comedienne a run for her money. The Wife of Bath’s speeches are replete with expletives, blasphemy and obscenities and the sheer guiltlessness with which these are rendered subverts the widely held notions of both women and comedy. For the Wife comes across as much a creation of Chaucer as a credible female comic narrator in her own right. Here is a creature who is throbbing with passions (not “Natural Coldness”) and exhibits an irrepressible joie-de-vivre (not “tears).

The Wife of Bath’s brand of humour not only challenges received notions of ‘feminine behaviour’ but also bypasses the norms of civilized life. It takes us back to our bodies, reminding us of our corporeality and rejects the demands of social decorum and beauty. Andrew Stott in his study of the role of the body in comedy has noted:

“If the comic hero is a sensualist then his or her main ally in hedonism must surely be the body, that medium in comedy through which humanity’s fascination with its instinctual and animal nature is best explored. The comic body is exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate and perverse organism”.⁴

Hence the body and the numerous biological functions not only provide fodder for humour but the body of the comic artist itself assumes the role of a medium that communicates the joke with all its comic possibilities. The mask of Vice and the motley costume of the clown/jester readily serve this dual role. The appearance of the Wife is identifiable with the variety of humor that she spews on to the rattled audience (the pilgrims as well as the readers). The grotesque distortions (gap-toothed, her hideously large hat, scarlet stockings etc.) seem to suggest her ‘monstrosity’ (since a large number of her contemporary readers *did* see in her a warning against the evolving feminist ideology) ⁵. Her bawdy, physical humour centered around “bele chose” is a disruptive force of evil which tends to shake up the harmony and status quo with its disturbing point of view vis-à-vis patriarchal ideology and ecclesiastical authority - two significant strongholds of the 14th century English society. The presence of the suave Prioress, the only other major female pilgrim, with her impeccable appearance, serves as a counterpoint to Wife of Bath’s anti-social sex-obsessed manic personality.

Having an unusual personality structure could have a significant bearing on the ability to make others laugh. This inference has been drawn by Dr. Gordon Claridge, a psychologist at the university of Oxford, after he analyzed 404 male and 119 female comedians from Australia, Britain and USA ⁶. These comic artists scored high on the following psychotic characteristics- traits which the Wife of Bath shares with them.

1. Schizophrenic, manic thinking which helps them to associate odd things and think ‘Out of the Box’. For instance, the Wife literally interprets god’s command to ‘wexe and multiply’ to justify her enormous sexual appetite. In her scheme of things marriage and virginity are not mutually exclusive but marriage itself enables the ‘production’ of more virgins.

And certes if ther were no seed Y-sowe

Virginittee, thanne wherof sholde growe? (71-2)

2. Cognitive disorganization- the mind of a comedian is an overactive playfield where the ideas/characters/incidents just keep popping up with no apparent logical connection. The never ending Prologue with its voluminous dissertations on guilt-ridden sex obsessed medieval theology, her experiences of five marriages and the Tale with its numerous digressions on the lecherous Friar to Midas to Pythagoras to a long tirade on gentillesse reveal the extremely sprightly mind of the Wife with its own 'method' in its 'madness'.
3. Impulsive non conformity- the researchers have observed a tendency towards impulsive antisocial behavior in comic artist- a trait which defines Alisoun's appearance, ideology and her life style. Her humorous attempts to redefine women's sovereignty are culturally and historically significant. This, as well as the Tale, with its thesis of "what women most desire" disrupts conventional notions of both gender and gentillesse.

Being exegetically skilled, the Wife humorously inverts accepted morality and Christian theology, as she says, "But counseilling is no Commandement" (67). Claiming to be a sensualist, she slyly refers to her secret desire to be like King Solomon (who had 700 wives and 300 mistresses) "To be refreshed halfe so ofte as he" (38). She claims to be a Venerian with Mars in the ascendant and therefore an ardent follower of the cult of marriage (s).

Quite predictably, marriage, which is a stock theme in comedies is a recurrent motif in this comic tour-de-force as well. Conventionally, marriage is viewed as the final resolution of the conflict and a re-imposition of normative values on the temporarily disrupted world of comedy. Therefore, comedy, with its power to disrupt the status quo by opening up the possibility of an additional, although a humorous, dominion of understanding, ultimately culminates in restoring harmony and order in the most acceptable social tropes such as marriage. The Wife of Bath goes one step further, for her story begins with marriage(s) and mockingly exposes the real worth of orthodox religion and conventional marriage - both of which uphold societal peace and harmony at the cost of individual needs and desires. As a comedienne par excellence endowed with "impulsive nonconformity" and "manic thinking", she ironically subverts the almost universal dream-like solution of marriage - a strategy

adopted by a number of later comedians as well. Where she out does them is not just in the passion and vehemence of her intolerance with staid ideologies but in the way she narrates her own marital experiences to expose the crassly materialistic foundation of this 'sacred' union.

Behind her levity lies a major concern of the Wife - the importance of economic power and its crucial role in the equation between the sexes. Her early marriage at the age of 12 (when the average age for girls was 17-20 years) ⁷ suggests compromised financial circumstances for which she tries to compensate with her four subsequent marriages. The narratives of her marriages with old men whom she forced to 'swinke' all night till they had given all their wealth to her, provide a hilarious subversion of the conventional power equation between the sexes.

The Wife's personal experiences of marriage and of a trading bourgeoisie engaged in thriving wool industry, she champions the cause of economic independence. For a while the comic mask seems to have lifted as she recounts the horrors of her fifth marriage after she gifted away all her accumulated wealth and consequently her free will and sovereignty to Jankyn, as a token of her love. Therefore, in Wife of Bath's comic credo, humour is as diversionary as it is revelatory. The Prologue and the Tale which begin with skepticism about all forms of authority, ironically themselves assume the form of texts which unsettle us with their hard hitting but realistic vision. The generous doses of humour make this process of illumination a little less perceptible.

The Wife's attacks on medieval concept of marriage based on St. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* with its fossilized misogynistic ideology draws the most venomous comic barbs of Alisoun. She extensively culls material from this notorious text and stretches the jokes to their farcical limit by interpreting them literally. The fate of Jankyn's book, a collage of anti-feminist material, consigned to the fire, is the final punch line of this elaborate joke on the medieval definition of marriage. The other major source from which she draws her comic darts are the department books published in the 14th century such as *The Book of the Knight of*

La Tour- Landry and *The Good man of Paris* which exhorted wives to cultivate ‘honour’, ‘gentillesse’, ‘worship’, and ‘obedience’ and tended, as Mary Carruthers has pointed out, to equate morality with manners and domestic propriety .⁸ Alisoun summarily rejects these expectations in her personal life as well as in her rhetoric. She gloats how she embarrassed her husband by confiding every detail of their life in her niece :

“For had my hosbonde pissed on a wall.
I wolde han told his conseil everydeel.” (534-8)

Thus she uses humour as a weapon to counter the trope of domestic government which valorized the husband as the ruler and the wife as an obedient subject. It epitomized a harmonious utopia based on numerous imperatives to be followed by the wife only. The husband appropriated all powers in this little kingdom. The Wife of Bath tries to redefine these skewed notions of matrimonial alliances.

The Wife of Bath shows her skills in humour production in sharp contradiction to the traditional gendered notions of comedy. Her manic temperament and subversive tendencies try to renegotiate the position of women vis-à-vis traditional religion and marriage. While her own success in her personal life and that of the Wife in the Tale may remain issues of endless debate, nevertheless, the humorist in her raises certain critical issues much ahead of her times. The expertise with which she accomplished this task, it completely obviates the prejudice against women as generators of humour. It also, more significantly, proves why Chaucer was seen as ‘Venus’ own clerke’ by tearing off layers of stereotypical perceptions about men and women. As Carolyn Dinshaw has observed:

“Chaucer was not only aware that gender is a social construction but that he self-consciously worked to oppose the dominance of masculinity that a patriarchal society places on text by creating a text in which gender identity and hierarchy were more fluid”.⁹

The Wife of Bath is invested with all the traditional 'masculine' qualities. She is bold, brash, brusque, loud, aggressive, revengeful, deceitful and, most unexpectedly, has an admirable sense of humour. There are no attempts to 'feminize' her. While she takes up a lot of issues crucial to women's sovereignty, the manner that she adopts is rather 'masculine'. This eclecticism also manifests itself in her brand of humour. Her humour is alternately self-deprecating and ascerbic and abrasive on the one hand, too personal and gossipy with its flippancy and irreverence on the other. It posits an ideology which is at once a weapon against her insecurities as well as an unparalleled comic extravaganza executed with great elan by a female comic artist.

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BIO NOTE

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