

# The Wife of Bath and Her Reveller Husband

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In her self-portrait, the Wife of Bath, while giving outspoken account of her motives for marrying three old men and a youth, does not tell why she chose to take the fourth man in marriage. As we are told, Alisoun married her fourth husband when she was still young, and probably still very attractive. On the other hand her husband, unlike his three predecessors whose docile nature had made themselves easy prey for Alisoun, was a difficult character. Besides, he had someone else who had mastery, at least in his heart, over him, thus cutting out any chance of her obtaining what she most desired.<sup>1</sup> It was very unlikely that she found him so only after their marriage. A past mistress in that art of the 'olde daunce' could not have failed to overlook, even before marriage, any blemish in her future husband that would mar her happiness in marriage. Why, then, did she choose to marry him?

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<sup>1</sup> Alisoun's ideal husband must be like one we meet in Franklin's Tale. Arveragus promised his wife Dorigen that he would never in all his life take mastery over her against her will nor would he show jealousy and that he would obey her in everything. Cf. F.N. Robinson ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (V 745-749), Oxford U.P., London, 1970, pp.135-6. Hereafter all citations from Chaucer's works are taken from this edition.

In regard to her first three marriages her objective was clear enough. Except for her fifth husband whom she 'took for love, and no riches,'<sup>2</sup> she married for what the old men had: the land and treasure they would eventually submit to her. She was attracted by the fact that they were rich and old. That they were 'goode', that is, they were tame and could easily be manipulated, was another advantage in favour of Alisoun. There is no doubt that she had thought, as soon as the marriage rite was over, she would be able to manage things as she liked and would face little difficulty in making her husbands surrender all their property, rights, and even their dignity as headmen of the household. Once she successfully made them give her 'hir lond and hir tresoor,' she informs her fellow pilgrims, she did not need to 'do lenger diligence / To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence.'<sup>3</sup> Instead she started to derive enjoyment from tormenting them, the most formidable engine of torture being her venomous tongue.

It was when the husband died that she found herself possessed of what she coveted — money, gold, silver, land and everything that the husband had. While the husband lived, whatever she had coaxed out of him could not be purely hers. It was legally in the possession of the husband and she could not alienate it. The husband's death, however, brought a complete change: (unless the husband had written a will to prevent it) not only the greater part of the property, including half of the land and house with its valuables, but also the ex-husband's social status came to her if they had no children. If the husband had been a master of some craft or trade, she could assume the position and become a member of the gild the husband had

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., (III 526).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., (III 204-6).

belonged to. She could be recognised as a freewoman of the town.<sup>4</sup> That meant a great deal in those days since simply living in the town did not give citizenship and nobody except a citizen had the right to open a shop in the town.

It may sound paradoxical, but when a wife lost her husband and became a widow, she gained a lot. In the wills in Bedfordshire, 63 percent of the testators granted their wives the home tenement for life, and in London 86 percent bequeathed their wives real property – tenements, rents, shops, gardens, taverns, breweries, wharves, or land in the country – as well as goods.<sup>5</sup> With luck a poor girl could become a possessor of enormous wealth. Barbara Hanawalt gives an example of a shepherd girl Thomasine born to poor parents:

While she was tending the sheep one day, Thomas Bumsby, a London mercer who traded in Cornwall, saw her and was struck by her beauty and good manners. He asked her to come to London as his servant. Her parents consented after he produced witnesses to testify to his character and contracted to endow her if he died.

The young woman might well have been mistress as well as servant to him. In any case his wife died several years later, and he married Thomasine. He died two years later, and, as they had no children, she got half of his estate. As a wealthy and beautiful young widow, she had many suitors and finally married Henry

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<sup>4</sup> Power, E., *Medieval Women*, Cambridge UP, 1983(1975), pp.60-61.

<sup>5</sup> Hanawalt, Barbara A., "Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England" in Walker, Sue Sheridan ed., *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1993, p.147.

Galle. When he died she was about thirty and again without children, so that she got half of Galle's estate as jointure. She then married John Percival, a merchant tailor and later mayor of London.<sup>6</sup>

When Thonasine's husband died, Hanawalt continues to inform us, she was left with tremendous fortune. The king, Henry VII, coveted her wealth and extorted 1000 pounds by false accusation. One that married for wealth did not necessarily sell one's liberty. The poor, perhaps unfree, country girl not only gained a huge capital but also attained an honourable position of mayoress – the first lady among the greatest magnates who enjoyed freedom to have a say in electing city officials, to pursue business, as well as having various privileges granted exclusively to free citizens. Chaucer tells us that being looked up as the wife of a city magnate would be a pleasure too great to decline. On festival days, when townspeople marched in procession, she could walk ahead of everybody in a majestically attired outfit. On such occasions she seized an opportunity to have an ostentatious display and had some retainer carry her mantel just as the wives of the powerful craftsmen would have done.

By outliving their husbands and putting their newly gained wealth as well as their freedom into good use, widows could elevate themselves in society. Matilda Fraunceys, daughter of a rich London merchant, first married one John Aubrey, another very rich Londoner. John died without children. This meant that the greater part of the property went to Matilda.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.157.

Her second husband, Sir Alan Buxhill, must have been a somebody and he belonged to the court. This marriage did not last long because Sir Alan died shortly after the union. Matilda's wealth must have got another boost. A widow of lesser means could have been no match for an earl. Matilda's third husband was John de Montagu, heir apparent of the Earl of Salisbury and one of the chief figures supporting Richard II.<sup>7</sup>

Although probably not so rich from the start as Matilda, our Alisoun, too, must have been enriched by the husbands' death. Along with the property, the right to run a business, if they or any of them had been tradesmen or masters of some craft, was left to her. Without it she had had no opportunity to demonstrate her skill in weaving in which she surpassed even the master weavers in Ypres or Ghent, the great cloth-making centres. Traders and craftsmen in Medieval England were jealous of women occupying men's jobs. They tried to exclude women labour to safeguard their own occupation. Only the wife or daughters of a master were tolerated as helpers of his business.<sup>8</sup> No matter how well she had been adept in weaving, she could not have put her skill into practice unless the privilege of trade had been conferred on her by the husbands' death.

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<sup>7</sup> A.R. Myers, *London in the Age of Chaucer*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1972, p.180.

<sup>8</sup> See Power, *Medieval Women*, Cambridge UP., 1975, p. 60. Power gives an interesting example:

"A complaint made at Bristol in 1461 that weavers set to work or hired to others their wives, daughters and maidens, 'by the which many & divers of the King's liege people, likely men to do the king service in his wars and defence of this land and sufficiently learned in the said craft goeth vagrant and unoccupied and may not have their labour to their living', and weavers were forbidden to employ women except those then getting their livelihood thus." Did our Wife fall into this last category? Certainly not; she had other means of making a living, and she was not a kind of person who would allow herself being put to toil and moil.

Things, however, did not go as our Wife might have wanted them to. Otherwise, by the time her third husband died she should have accumulated enough capital, and possibly had a certain degree of social status, to be independent, and she would have been free to turn down matrimonial offers from quarters she found unappealing. A widow's claim to her portion of the property, her dower, was not always granted her uncontestedly. Often relatives, usually the dead husband's kinspeople, came in for their share.<sup>9</sup> In that situation, one way for the widow to secure her dower seemed to have been to abide by what had been drawn up by the dead husband in his will. Needs must when the devil drives. If she wanted to inherit one item she craved, she had to take in others along with it. Alisoun's fourth husband, it seems, had been among the other things forced upon her. Take him or drop the whole legacy was the demand made against her.

Normally a widow with a large fortune attracted many suitors in Chaucer's time. The only chance left to an ambitious young man without inheritance wanting to rise in society was through marriage with a widowed wife whose husband had left her his property together with the proprietorship of some workshop or trade.<sup>10</sup> In medieval towns you could not start business simply because you wanted to. The right to do business was limited to privileged few, and in general it passed on by way of inheritance. There was no other way left for an apprentice but to spend the rest of his life as a journeyman, working under a master. The usage that after seven years of apprenticeship the youth was ready to be a master, it

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Walker, Sue Sheridan, "Litigation as Personal Quest: Suing for Dower in the Royal Courts, circa 1272-1350," *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, p.85.

<sup>10</sup> Myers, pp. 154-5.

appears, had become nothing other than a myth.<sup>11</sup>

If our Alisoun had been really rich, the fourth man, especially if he had been without means, would have found it profitable to marry her. In entering into betrothal this man's sole interest must have been in the position and wealth the bride would bring to him. Little did he give thought to her personal attributes: whether or not she was pretty, warm or kind in the heart, was totally out of the question. He was indifferent to her as an individual. He did not want her; he already had someone else to love and be loved. Did she want him, then? No. She would never have a man without possessions; and above all the greatest deterrent was the presence of his 'paramour'. What acted as a catalyst to bind these unwilling man and woman together? Money.

As the Pardoner points out 'Radix malorum est Cupiditas,'<sup>12</sup> greed is the root of every kind of human behaviour. The antagonistic couple had a common interest without which they would never have allowed themselves to associate with each other. Without a lure, she professed herself, you could not win a person into something.<sup>13</sup> And the allure was too appetizing for each of them to refuse an offer, no matter how undesirable or repulsive the other party was.

To find out the situation in which the Wife might have been placed before her fourth marriage, we need, it seems, to discard the notion that she had become rich and enjoyed free possession of landed property as well

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the London guilds failed to give their apprentices proper training, and some even neglected their duties to make the young men fully qualified. See Myers, p.152.

<sup>12</sup> *The Pardoner's Tale*, VI 334.

<sup>13</sup> The wife here uses hawks as a figure. See *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, III 415.

as other forms of wealth. We are inclined to take her statement that 'They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor'<sup>14</sup> at its face value. However, it was not possible for a husband, under the common law, to transfer his property to his wife while he was alive.<sup>15</sup> What they did give her, in actual fact, seems to be only a verbal promise to the effect that they would allow her to draw what cash she wanted out of the profit the land produced. The land and the other 'tresoor' themselves had still remained in the hands of the old husbands till the end of their lives. If this had not been the case, why did Alisoun have to protest to their husbands and say: 'why hydestow, with sorwe,/ The keyes of thy cheste away fro me?'<sup>16</sup> This was a token protest of hers, hardly meant to be taken seriously — she knew very well that the whole property, inclusive of land, tenements, rents, money, goods, rights, etc., was in reality the husbands'. When she continued to say: 'It is my good as wel as thyn,'<sup>17</sup> she knew that she merely repeated what her husbands had said to her. She also knew very well that it had been their blind promise made in a rash moment just to conciliate her and appease her Mars-hot rage. Those words of hers were a proof that she had not yet won from her husbands any legal rights over the immovable estate and other movable property.

The way property changed hands in Medieval England is a dauntingly complicated subject for me at this time, but even a superficial knowledge might clarify our question — why did our Wife have to marry the fourth

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<sup>14</sup> *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, III 204.

<sup>15</sup> D. W. Robertson, Jr., "And For My Land Thus Hastow Mordred Me?": Land Tenure, the Cloth Industry, and the Wife of Bath, *The Chaucer Review*, The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, 1980, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 408.

<sup>16</sup> *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, III 308-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, III 310.



husband? Let us start with an assumption that the first three husbands died, leaving substantial property, both personal and real. What would become of the property was a simple matter if they had had an heir, especially a male one. The property would have gone to him, leaving some part of it to provide for the widow. The portion for the widow was her dower and normally it was a third of the property that her husband possessed, hence we have the term 'a widow's third'. She was entitled to hold her dower for life; it was hers even when she remarried. (On her death the right to receive that land usually went to the deceased husband's heir.)

A thriving business or wealth could dictate one's course of life and when circumstances compelled people were forced into arranged marriages. Infertility or premature death of an heir necessitated men of business to get a second-best man (or woman) to take on what would be left behind. This was not so uncommon because 'on average mercantile businesses survived two generations at the most and the wealth of individuals was continually redistributed amongst other members of the merchant group in bequests and through marriage.'<sup>18</sup>

Did Alisoun's husband no.3 have a son to inherit his property? In all probability he did not. If he did, a greater part of it would have gone to the son and the story might have ended there. It was only when there were no sons or daughters that the land could go to collateral kins.<sup>19</sup> Since he had no heir direct in line, he had to make provision so that he would be able to gratify somebody he loved, without letting his property be scattered among

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<sup>18</sup> Kermode, Jenny, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge U.P., 1998, p.80.

<sup>19</sup> Chris Given-Wilson ed., *An Illustrated History of Late Medieval England*, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 75.

strangers. There were cases in which property was inherited by one's grandson. This happened when the son predeceased the testator.<sup>20</sup> It was not likely, however, that our man had a grandson.

Where a son was lacking, a brother of his was the likeliest candidate to be nominated. If all his brothers had been married and could not fill the place, one of their sons, the old man's nephew, was likely to fill the place.<sup>21</sup> The wife's third husband must have written, as did many of his contemporaries, a will in which he named his nephew as inheritor of most of what he would be leaving behind him. It was equally probable that the candidate was the old husband's godson. Ties between medieval godparents and godchildren were so strong that bequests were made to one's godsons.<sup>22</sup>

He did not forget his wife in the will, either. He, in his dotage, doted on Alisoun no less ardently — no matter how foully she nagged at him. The usual thing a husband did for his wife was to give enough for the rest of her life. Medieval husbands were, contrary to our guess, not jealous: rarely did they object to their wives' remarriage after their death. Some of them even wished that their wives should remarry.<sup>23</sup> Each of Alisoun's first three husbands, specifically the third, was one of those indulgent husbands: he tried the best he could to provide for her. He managed to think of a way in

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<sup>20</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. 58 ff.

<sup>21</sup> See Kermode, p.79. Also Rosenthal, p.66: 'Sometimes, when most needed, grandchildren failed to put in an appearance; the resort to the dead man's (or woman's) brother or sisters as heirs, let alone to those even farther out in the concentric circles of kinship, testifies to the absence of a three-generation link when it would have been summoned up had it been there. To outlive the children might mean a resort to grandchildren; to have had no children was an early dead end.'

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rosenthal, pp.72-3.

<sup>23</sup> Hanawalt, p. 148.

which she would be able to have, if not with legal force, a joint share of the whole property. Even though Alisoun had had sovereignty and complete control over her old husbands and had been successful enough to make them provide for her (after their death), she could not at all feel safe. Not all people entrusted by testators were honest; fraud, deception or negligence came in the way of the wills before they were executed exactly as the testators had wished.<sup>24</sup> Her third husband's consideration for her — it is obvious that he had, out of his genuine love and kindness, tried his best to make provision for her — could, however, have been nothing less than compulsion. No other choice had been left to Alisoun but to marry a man chosen by him. Whether her new husband was the old man's nephew or his godson, this new marriage was, to borrow Rosenthal's wording, a 'semi-forced' one.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the Wife of Bath was not a kind of person who would submissively let others exploit her. It is likely that she had her own plans to make the best of the matter and married him with a view to gaining something, just as Chaucer is supposed to have married to his advantage socially as well as economically.<sup>26</sup>

The reveller husband must have been in friendly terms with a

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<sup>24</sup> See Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p.105 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, "Fifteenth-Century Widows and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration, and Life Choices," in Sue Sheridan Walker ed., *Wife & Widow in Medieval England*, The University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Chaucer married Philippa de Roet in his mid-twenties, in 1366. Philippa was a lady-in-waiting in the queen's household and her sister was to become the third wife of John of Gaunt, one of the most influential figures in the realm. Cf. Crow, Martin M. & Clair C. Olson ed., *Chaucer Life-Records*, University of Texas Press, 1966, pp.67-93. Also Percy, Roy J. ed., *Studies in the Age of Chaucer I*, The New Chaucer Society, The University of Oklahoma, 1979, pp.174-5.

summoner—like one we meet among Chaucer's pilgrims—who would allow him to keep his paramour not only for twelve months but for whatever length of time he pleased; even if the secret had been leaked to the authority, there was no need for him to be afraid of the canon law. If the worst came to the worst, this summoner advised him, he could save his skin by simply paying a certain amount of money as a penalty. His dearest friend must have been a friar whose absolution was pleasant and who easily gave penance. Without weeping and repenting before his confessor, by giving generously out of the coffer he inherited, he could easily be cleansed of his offensive sin. When these two friends failed him, he had somebody else to turn to: most probably he patronized an able pardoner with pardons hot from Rome.

To lead a life as he pleased with a paramour without reproach or persecution, however, the reveller needed a huge money box to bribe the church officials into secrecy. Thus, when he had great expectations coming his way, he could never afford to let go a golden opportunity—even though it was stipulated in the testator's will that he also had to take over something less tempting along with the large fortune.

Marrying a widow in pursuit of her wealth was, according to Wit, an 'unkindly' (scandalous) marriage and the outcome of it would be foul words between husband and wife, without any child but with strife and hate.<sup>27</sup> Naturally the knot between the Wife and the reveller was not too strong: the one had his 'paramour' in compensation for what he could not get from

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<sup>27</sup> Kane, George and Donaldson, E. Talbot, ed., *Piers Plowman: the B Version*, (IX, 160ff), University of London, 1975, pp. 402-3,

his wife,<sup>28</sup> while the other, to shun him no doubt, was constantly away from home on her repeated pilgrimages. Even when she was in town she assuredly caused enough trouble and strife, loitering about with a beau—she used to take their handsome apprentice Janekyn as her escort—and went wherever she pleased and took her 'disport.'

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<sup>28</sup> We are not clearly informed when he exactly began to have his mistress—whether it was before the marriage or after it. Placing it after their spousal seems to fit in as an explanation for his motive of his conduct; whereas it leaves us wondering how and why an expert in the game of love let that pass right under her very nose. She could easily have kept a tight rein on the man, if not make him adore her, had she bent the mind to it. I am tempted to place the incident before their marriage.

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