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Freedom in Adultery for Women in Medieval Fiction

Many married women in medieval literature tend to have a difficult time navigating their personal lives as a result of the positions that their marriages place them in. This difficulty often limits their chances for individual freedom apart from their husbands, almost to the point where there hardly seems to be any real chance to access freedom at all. However, characters such as the Wife of Bath and the wife of Bisclavret both react to the restrictions placed upon them by committing adultery during different phases of their marriages. Instead of choosing the path of adultery to deliberately hurt their husbands for the mere sake of wicked fun, the women go through with their actions for the purpose of finding their own sense of freedom for themselves, allowing as much of an independent identity as they can possibly access under their marital circumstances. In *Bisclavret* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the women find ways to negotiate the confines of their marriages by committing adultery as the only means of achieving freedom within that marital relationship.

While Marie de France often appears to be a writer that promotes the misogynistic idea of unfaithful women that deserve whatever cruel fate awaits them in her work, she undercuts this by redefining motivation for Bisclavret's wife beyond inflicting cruelty upon her werewolf husband. Sahar Amer writes in "Marie de France Rewrites Genesis: The Image of Woman in Marie de France's Fables": "To liberate woman from her association with sin and thus ultimately to claim her own female poetic voice means to re-write or re-interpret Original Sin" (490). Rather than simply condemning the wife, Marie de France utilizes adultery as the only means for the wife's

chance of freedom in her marriage to the werewolf, challenging the social tendency to exclusively dismiss adulterous women as evil. In *Bisclavret*, Marie introduces the danger of werewolves who consume human flesh and live in houses in the forest through the fear that Bisclavret's wife has before and after he confesses his werewolf status, causing her to seek freedom and relief in her life through adultery with the knight who loves her. The initial belief about the werewolf's wife is that she is a nasty, unfaithful hag who deserves to be tortured by the King and exiled from the land as well as have her nose permanently mutilated, yet her sins are evoked from a place of self-protection to avoid being harmed from a prideful flesh-eating creature who was untrue to her when it came to confessing his true nature.

Marie originally claims that their marriage is a loving relationship, yet the way the wife speaks to him throughout their first interaction in the story evokes more of a sense of suppressed fear rather than love. She flat out admits to being scared of her husband's anger when she asks him about whether or not he is having an affair, a legitimate reason for confrontation in any marriage, which holds significance because betrayal first arrives from the husband's actions and failure to reveal what he is, not the wife. The wife eventually says, "Lord, I am so anxious /on those days when you leave me; /when I arise I am so sad about it" (43-45). This fear being grounded into their marriage before he reveals his werewolf identity is important because up until that point, she genuinely believes she loves him, and it is *his* betrayal that ignites the ongoing cycle of betrayal in their marriage; the entire issue could possibly have been avoided, or at least handled better, if Bisclavret had been honest with his wife. After he confesses where his clothes are hidden, the wife makes up her mind: "and she thought hard concerning her situation, /how she could get away; /she did not want to lie beside him any more" (100-102). The wife's choice to take away his clothes stems not from a wicked mindset of wanting to hurt Bisclavret,

but as a way of protecting herself from a creature who cherishes eating people and lied about it; this shifts the focal point for her motivation on the freedom she desires for herself, not Bisclavret. While she ironically worried about adultery, the betrayal of hiding his werewolf secret pushes her over the edge. Therefore, his werewolf status ignites her decision to seek out the knight and accept him as a lover to escape the emotional distress of being married to Bisclavret.

The wife indeed commits adultery, a considerable sin of lust, but Bisclavret's hidden desire for human flesh results from a werewolf's hunger, layering his betrayal with murder and his sense of pride for it. This contrast is significant regarding how the wife does not find immense pleasure in her adulterous acts, yet ultimately, she is the one who receives the harsher punishment for her wrongdoings. Dr. Tracy states in "Sympathizing with the Werewolf's Wife: The Dynamics of Trust, Betrayal, and Bestiality in Bisclavret", "The wife resorts to adultery only to extricate herself from this marriage, repaying her husband's deceit with her own, an act for which she will be perpetually punished while her wolf-husband is fully reintegrated into the courtly society" (2). Adultery with the knight is the wife's only chance of freedom, but their marriage is born out of an agreement of adultery, not mutual love, and diminishes idealistic notions of courtly love. In fact, Marie de France manipulates the language of the knight's introduction to focus more on how he desperately loves her, instead of both parties loving each other. Marie describes the knight as a man "who had loved her a long time /and greatly implored and courted her /and greatly devoted himself to her service" (104-106). Arguably, the knight becomes a sort of servant for Bisclavret's wife since he willingly follows her orders on hiding Bisclavret's clothes, which raises her newfound freedom with a sense of power over a man who provides an honest adoration for her with both words and action. Marie describes the wife's side

with little mention of love: “and she bound him to her by oath” (119). The wife treats adultery more like a transaction to achieve the freedom she wants because her goal is to escape Bisclavret’s abuse, not to write a new love story for herself with the knight, so the wife’s character evolves from living in fear of Bisclavret to making decisions that focus on her wishes.

When it comes to *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, she takes a greater sense of lustful enjoyment when it comes to her adulterous manner. Geoffrey Chaucer paints the Wife of Bath as a woman who is unapologetic and unafraid of her sexuality resulting from the difficulty she recalls from her bad marriages. A great majority of the prelude to her tale involves stories written by men that she has been told by other men, including one of her husbands towards the end of her prologue, which provokes her need to find an individual sense of freedom through adultery. In her article “Practicing Women: The Matter of Women in Medieval English Literature” Elizabeth Ann Robertson claims, “In her prologue, with its rewriting of patristic misogyny, she attempts to break free of the constraints of that hegemonic ideology...in her tale, the wife not only criticizes and manipulates that ideology, but also revises it” (518). The Wife of Bath arguably rejects the male dominance behind the various theological stories told to her because the mindset towards women is what oppresses medieval wives like her rather than the stories themselves. This explains why her tale involves a female dominance over the average heroic knight who ends up being a rapist early on. In “Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer's ‘Wife of Bath's Tale’”, Susan Carter declares, “The Wife sees that maidens are grist for the mill in the chivalric scheme-objects with the limited option of being either rescued or raped-and her response is to rewrite the script, allowing the hag to oppress and reeducate the errant knight” (334). This male force of harassment she becomes desperate to free herself from is most evident when she discusses her relationship with Jankyn,

whom she quickly regrets since he forbids everything that she desires. The fact that this restriction refers to not one or two but all of Alisoun's desires as a woman and a wife places her in an unsatisfied position compared to the three husbands she enjoyed, causing her to respond with marital betrayal; this level of unhappiness contrasts with how an abundant amount of her prologue revolves around the ecstasy she feels when engaging in marital sex. Later when she is being harassed with a multitude of stories about wives mistreating their husbands by Jankyn, their built up tension with one another leads to a physical altercation between the two, including her getting smacked to the point of deafness in one ear. The physicality of the violence Alisoun experiences does not cause her to feel guilty over her actions and beg for repentance, but further perpetuates her desire for freedom as a wife that she enables in her tale. S. H. Rigby says in "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women": "She is thus presented as a perceptive critic of misogynist orthodoxy who beats male scholars at their own game and creates her own authoritative position from which to speak in defence of her sex and to convince us of her views" (134). In her case, the Wife of Bath does not allow the violence thrust upon her to shelter her exploration of freedom through adultery, instead promoting sexual exploration for women in general as well as for individual benefit.

Once again, a medieval woman like the Wife of Bath makes the decision of adultery to elevate her own freedom rather than to tear apart the especially bad husbands, like Jankyn, in her life. She admits her sexual pride: "I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun/ But ever folwed myn appetit,/ Al were he short or long or blak or whit" (622-624). Her determination for sexual liberation elevates her actions by utilizing her sexuality not only for the physical pleasure she fancies but also for the freedom she craves after being with a man who restrains her from all of her desires. The Wife of Bath's understanding of her marital position urges her to make the most

out of what she has, so that makes her sexuality much more important than it may seem to some of the men she's telling her stories to. Even though she criticizes the male hypocrisy of biblical tales of prim and proper wives being completely devoted to their husbands and having sex mainly for procreation, she still respects God in the sense that He gave her the body that she wants to use as often as humanly possible. She testifies, "In wyfhode I wol use myn instrument/ As frely as my makere hath it sent" (149-150). While she does recount a great number of men throughout her prologue, her motivation for adultery stems not so much from an obsession over men in general but a strong yearning to satisfy her sexual appetite. The primary determination to achieve satisfaction for her sexual yearning holds significance for her freedom from the sexual restriction that marriages had due to religious rules. Setefanus Suprayitno mentions in "Experience Versus Authority: The Search for Gender Equality in Chaucer's 'the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale", "...medieval canon law also restricted the number of times a married couple might have intercourse...But in Alisoun's way of thinking, she intends to use her "instrument," sexual organ, as generously as God gave it to her" (12). Her yearning as a female is further reflected in her story by having Guinevere decide the knight's fate instead of King Arthur whose role is noticeably larger in other versions of tales about his kingdom. While the werewolf's wife uses adultery more as a means of freedom to make her own decisions, the Wife of Bath's marital betrayal revolves around finding sexual liberation for herself as well as freedom to make choices.

Medieval marriages are dominant forces that control the lives of medieval women in literature. Therefore, the sense of independent control that the wife of Bisclavret and the Wife of Bath take through their adultery gives them a slice of freedom of choice they would be unable to achieve otherwise. In the end, both the Wife of Bath and Bisclavret's wife commit adulterous acts as the only option to truly break free from the marital restrictions in their lives.

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