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Alison Unfolded

In the Miller’s prologue, the Miller mentions how the Knight’s Tale did not hold passion for desire that is real, so in the Miller’s Tale the Miller tells a story of true passion. This desire for passion that is portrayed in the Miller’s Tale plays on the stereotypes of gender, profession, as well as age to build the characters, in particular, Alisoun. Alisoun is a young eighteen-year-old girl who weds John the carpenter, who is described to be illiterate, and highly gullible in nature. Alisoun’s nature is gradually unfolded as the reader’s see how she portrays herself to be a loyal wife but simultaneously has sworn her trouthe to Nicholas, and her character is slowly revealed through her actions and words of deception.

The Miller describes Alison in a very innocent manner which speaks volumes as to who Alison becomes as the story goes on. As the Miller states her to be,

“Fair was this Yonge wif, and therewithal

As any wesele hir body gent and small…

Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye.

And sikerly she hadde a likerous eye…

She was ful moore blissful on to see

Than is the new pere-jonette tree

And softer than the wolle is of a wether…

Ful brighter was the shining of her hewe”. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Alison is perceived as a woman who embodies a soft and very gentilesse personality, as her physical exterior would give that impression. The Miller describes her to be blissful to see similar to a pere-jonette tree, which is a an early-ripening kind of pear. The analogy of Alison to the early ripening fruit is fitting for her character, as this comparison is almost foreshadowing how Alison ripens into a character the reader least expects. Also, the fruit that Alison is compared to is acknowledged as softer than a sheep’s wool, which makes it seem like her personality is equivalent to the softness of a cloud. Her complexion even, is said to be shining. It is hard to see who Alison becomes just by reading the very first description of her – which is befitting of how the gradual unfolding of her character is seen as she is described to be an immaculate being.

Emelye, the female character in the Knight’s Tale is different from Alison as she embodies passivity, which shows the stark contrast between her and Alison. Her description is an allusion to her personality, as the Knight states her to be,

“That Emelye, that fairer was to sene

Than is the lilye upon his stalke grene,

And fressher than the May with floures newe –

For with the rose colour stroof her hewe;

I noot which was the finer of hem two – …

She gadreth floures, party white and rede,

To make a subtil garland for hir hede,

And as an aungel hevenisshly she song.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

From the very beginning of the Knight’s Tale, the image of Emelye remains constant. Emelye is compared to a lily upon a green stalk and is said to be fresher than the flowers in May. She is so like the flowers that the Knight cannot distinguish or choose between her rosy complexion, or the flowers she picked from being the most beautiful. Also, the way in which Emelye picks flowers to make a garland for her head plays into the image of her being very poised. The last line that describes Emelye to be like an angel, who sings heavenly is similar to how Alison is described as an immaculate being. However, the key component that distinguishes Alison from Emelye is the reader’s perception of the two characters. Emelye will continue to be seen in this manner till the very end of the story, whereas in the Miller’s Tale an unexpected change will cause the reader’s perception of Alison to shift. Furthermore, this description of Emelye is indicative of her passive personality, as she submits to desire of the knights and does not actively participate in her story. In the Knight’s Tale, the knights are in charge of what will happen, particularly regarding who will have Emelye. Whereas, in the Miller’s Tale, Alison takes full responsibility for who she desires to be with and goes to lengths to see to it. How Alison manipulates her husband to be with the one she loves is the difference between passivity that Emelye harbors, and the active participation that Alison embodies.

Chaucer in many of his narratives has described “jealousy” to be the detriment of any relationship, and it is one of the reasons the readers see Alison being so active in the role of her desire. John, the carpenter, is of a very old age, as described in the story to be around in his sixties, but he marries a woman who is eighteen years old, Alisoun. In John’s house, he has a student of astrology living with him, who goes by the name of Nicholas, who happens to be closer in age to Alisoun. John, being aware of his old age is constantly jealous. John becomes so encapsulated in his jealousy that he “held hire narwe in cage, for she was yong and wilde, and he was old, And demed himself like a cokewold” (Chaucer, MT, 118). The very fact that John has already considered himself to be a cuckold speaks volumes as to his behavior in keeping his wife in a metaphorical narrow cage. John does not realize that by keeping her at bay, and in a cage may be the very reason why he falls into the trap of becoming a cuckold. Alisoun herself has come to the realization that “min housbande is so ful of jalousye” (Chaucer, MT,121), that in her conversation with Nicholas she outrightly states this.

Unlike the Knight’s Tale, Alisoun as the female lead, takes a greater role in showcasing her real intentions, as she even partakes in deception through her words and actions. For instance, in conversation with Nicholas, she readily states in clear tones that she is not interested in Nicholas, however, after some apologizing, Alisoun reconsiders Nicholas. Upon this reconsideration, Alisoun “she hir love graunted him atte laste, And swoor hir ooth, by Seint Thomas of Kent, That she wolde been at his comaundement” (Chaucer, MT, 121). Essentially, this is a key point in the story where Alisoun’s character has been revealed to showcase that she has indeed pledged herself to Nicholas, regardless of her commitment to her husband, John. The taleteller builds on the expectation and stereotype that women are cunning, and frivolous, while also building on the fact that old men are simply incapable of keeping a young wife. As even in the narrative of the story it states that, “men sholde wedde his similitude…For youthe and elde is often at debaat” (Chaucer, MT, 119), however, John is unaware of this as he is illiterate.

Thus, John must endure the repercussions of his decision, which elicit Alisoun’s active role in deceiving her husband, so that she may have her desire fulfilled. In the devious plans of Nicholas and Alisoun, “Nicholas shal shapen hem a wile, This sely jalous housbande to beguile, And if so be the game wente aright, she sholde slepen in his arms al night; For this was hir desir and his also” (Chaucer, MT, 125). Nicholas and Alisoun come to this conclusion together, and Alisoun in particular actively participates in beguiling her husband. Alisoun’s husband is called a “sely jealous housbande”, which in other words means a simple jealous husband, which has a derogatory notion to it. The derogatory notion is that Alisoun will take advantage of her husband’s simplicity and use that to deceive him into becoming a cuckold. Furthermore, Alisoun’s desire is clearly portrayed in the above lines, as it is also her desire to sleep with Nicholas all night instead of with John, her husband. This plays further on the stereotypes that woman are supposedly cunning, and old men are blind to their wives’ true intentions, so that young men like Nicholas are able to swoop in and make them cuckolds. The real reason behind John’s becoming a cuckold is deeply rooted in the ideology of jealousy, that desire cannot be controlled. The need to control desire is exactly what loses desire. Alisoun being the young woman she is, finds love and desire in Nicholas who is not in the least jealous but rather cunning to match her equal deception towards her husband.

The devious plan of Nicholas and Alisoun is that Nicholas will feign sickness by staying in his room with the necessary provisions to sustain himself, all the while beguiling John to think he is seriously ill. In this course of action, it is Alisoun’s job to not call upon Nicholas in order to maintain their charade. The trick is successful, and John is alarmed by Nicholas as he has locked himself up in his chamber. Soon, Nicholas reveals to John his supposed reasons for being cooped up, as he states, “Shal falle a rein, and that so wilde and wood That half so greet was never Noes flood” (Chaucer, MT, 129). In other words, Nicholas tells John that there shall fall a rain that will be so severe that it will not be half as a great as Noah’s flood. This tells the great magnanimity of the possible coming catastrophe, and John as he is illiterate falls for this charade on the basis of knowing that Nicholas is a student of astrology. This showcases John to be very “sely” or overly simple in what is occurring around him.

The lack of suspicion John holds is made further lucid, as Alisoun reassures him by corresponding in the correct manner with Nicholas’s plan for them both to manifest their desires. As when John went to his wife, Alisoun, and told her of his “privetee”, or secrets, she responded by,

“And she was war, and knew it bet than he,

What all this queinte cast was for to seye.

But nathelees she ferde as she wolde deye,

And said, ‘Allas, go forth thy wey anon!

Help us to scape, or we be deed echon!

I am thy trewe wedded wif;

Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lif.’” (Chaucer, MT, 132).

In other words, Alisoun was aware and knew the situation better than John, her husband, and knew what all the ingenious contrivance signified. Regardless of her knowledge of the trickery, she acted as if she would die due to the knowledge that a flood worse than Noah’s was to come. So, she said to her husband to go right away and help them to escape, or all of them would die. She further makes her claim more credible by stating herself to be her husband’s true wife and plays on the expectation that a married couple would be honest and true to each other. On that notion, she once again tells her husband to go, and do what needs to be done in order to save their lives.

This ingenious contrivance on the part of Alison and Nicholas showcased not only John’s gullibility, but also Alison’s cunning ability to deceive her own husband. This deception consisted of them setting up tubs high up in their roof and waiting till the flood comes so that they may escape. Once the necessary paraphernalia had been set up, and all of them were situated readily in their tubs and had made sure that John stayed there. What occurred next was this,

“Doun of the laddre stalketh Nicholay,

And Alison, ful softe adoun she spedde.

Withouten words mo they goon to bedde….

And thus lith Alison and Nicholas

In bisinesse of mirthe and of solas…” (Chaucer, MT, 134).

In other words, Nicholas went down the ladder, and Alison followed softly with haste, and without any more words they went to bed. So, they lay in bed together in the business of fun and sexual pleasure. Alisoun’s ready compliance with the plan showcases her desire to engage in sexual relations with Nicholas, instead of her husband, John. Moreover, her readiness to deceive is an indication of her character being revealed as one who knows what she wants and does so with firmness.

Alison’s firmness in what she desires is made clear in engagement with another prospective lover, as she disdainfully tells him to go away. The prospective lover, Absolon, shows up at the window of her bedroom wall to serenade to her. Alison’s response is,

“‘Go fro the window, Jakke-fool,’ she saide.

‘As help me God, it wol nat be “com pa me”!

I love another – and ellis I were to blame –

Wel bet than thee, by Jesu, Absolon.

Go forth thy wey, or I will caste a stoon,

And lat me slepe, a twenty-devel wey!” (Chaucer, MT, 136).

In other words, Alison essentially told Absolon to go away from the window, and allegedly calling him a ‘Jack-fool’, which is foul language directed towards him. A clear indication of Alison’s character growth, as well as her relaying her clear emotions and interests to others. Moreover, she states to Absolon that God help her, she certainly will not be asking him to come and kiss her! As she loves another, she is not interested in him, or otherwise she would be to blame. She also remarks to him that he should go his way, or she will throw a stone at him. Lastly, she indicates loud and clearly that she would like to sleep, in the devil’s name! Alison is one of Chaucer’s rare female-characters that has a lot of dialogue, and purposeful intentions which are directly connected to her own desires.

Alison’s desires are the root cause of her decision, so even though Absolon is described on paper to be a perfect prospective lover, Alison still chose Nicholas based on her will. As perhaps in the narrative it stated, “Alwey the nye slye Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth” (Chaucer, MT, 125). In other words, this means that always the one who is near by makes the loved one who is far away fall out of sight, which is exactly what happens to Absolon. Furthermore, if anything else, it clearly showcases how Alison exercises her right to choose whom she desires, very much unlike the Knight’s Tale where the result of desire is left up to the God’s.

The readers of the Miller’s Tale saw Alison’s description in the beginning as an immaculate being with the possibility of being passive like Emelye from the Knight’s Tale, but that perception was slowly overturned. As Alison’s nature gradually unfolded with scenarios of deceit and lies, her character was revealed. The scenario in which she reassured her husband that there indeed is an oncoming catastrophe worse than Noah’s flood, confirmed the idea that Alison is a character who will go to lengths to have her desires be met. Even if those desires have the cost of publicly shaming her husband. Other instances, where Alison rejects another prospective lover, Absolon, is indicative of her exercising her rights to the full extent of her wishes. In many ways, the character of Alison is in full control of her destiny in both good and bad will. There is sympathy for a character like Alison to have been wedded to a man who is about forty-years-older than her. Yet, there is also an element of surprise when a character that has been described as innocent as she is, to rather than having possible hints of passivity take part in mischievous plans in order to reach her desired end-goal.

Bibliography:

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1. Geoffrey Chaucer and Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Miller's Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2005), pp. 114-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Geoffrey Chaucer and Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Knight's Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2005), pp. 35-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)