

MOTHERHOOD IN THE WIFE OF BATH

It has been generally assumed that the Wife of Bath was childless, although there are those who contest this assumption, namely Mary Carruthers in her essay "The Wife of Bath and the painting of the lions".¹ In this essay I propose to give evidence which proves that Alisoun almost definitely had no children. Before giving my reasons for viewing her as childless, it is necessary to give a description of the family and to explain how important it was considered to be in Medieval England. We also need to look at the role of women within the household and family, the purpose of marriage as well as views on sex and love. Fertility, pregnancy, childbearing, and child-rearing also need to be assessed. By taking into account the general views on and common practices concerning these activities in the Middle Ages, I hope to show that from the way she talks it was very unlikely that Alisoun was ever a mother and that she was far from typical of a woman of her age and class. I shall draw on information given us from the real life autobiography of Margery Kempe, who was from the same class and era, to show how even a woman as distainful of sex, professionally active and well travelled as she, could not avoid fourteen pregnancies. This for me shows that the Wife of Bath was very untypical of her sex and class for being childless.

At the heart of every English household, was the same basic unit: the family, in particular the nuclear family. This consisted of the husband, wife, and their dependent offspring. For a couple belonging to the lower echelons of society, two or three children would have been typical, while the upper classes tended to have far more. Take for example Thomas Howard, the second Duke of Norfolk (1443-1524), who had ten children by his first wife and

¹ Carruthers, M. (1979) "The Wife of Bath and the painting of the lions" in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature - The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, London: Routledge, 1994, 49-50.

thirteen by his second.¹ The reasons for this difference lay in social and economic factors. Medcalf states that in the absence of contraception, the fertility of a woman was governed by the age at which she married and the time of her menopause or death. For all social groups menopause came at roughly the age of 40, but death often came earlier, with the average expectation of life standing at around 35 to 40. Furthermore, the rates of infant mortality were high for all classes, with approximately 30 to 40 per cent of all children dying before the age of 15. Therefore, one of the variables in determining family size was the age at marriage.

As it was rare to live with one's in-laws, a couple who wished to marry had to be able to set up home independently. This meant they needed to have sufficient income. Among the upper classes this income was usually provided by the parents and parents-in-law. The future married couple were formally endowed by a marriage settlement. This external endowment meant that the gentry and nobility could marry younger than the lower classes. Men tended to do so at 22 to 23 years of age and women at 17 or 18.² Although other factors will be taken into account later, this early age of marriage helped to provide women with more childbearing years (provided they lived long enough).

It is interesting to note that the Wife of Bath was married to her first husband at the age of twelve but how typical this was remains to be seen. At first she does not make clear exactly what that first marriage entailed for she simply says *For, lordinges, sith I twelve yeer of age,/ Thonked by God that is eterne on live,/ Housbondes at chirche dore I have had five*³. Although child marriages did take place during this era, the settlement of property being the reason for them, the newly wed couples rarely lived together until they were in their late teens. Moreover, they were not considered marriages *de facto* until sexual intercourse had taken place and it is doubtful, though not impossible, that Alisoun would have been expected to have sexual relations with her older husband or whether she was even capable of them due to her

¹ Medcalf, S. (ed.) (1981) *The Later Middle Ages*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 230.

² *Ibid.* 231.

³ Chaucer, G. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 5-7

being so young.¹ What was more common between partners of such a young age were espousals *de futuro*, in which the couple were betrothed to each other in order to cement an alliance between the families of each. What was always at stake was property, as was the case with the Wife of Bath. Marriage was totally utilitarian for the chief objective of it was gain, not love as we understand it today. As Medcalf states:

Money figured so largely because of the economic realities of the times. Now we assume that wealth will be earned; the late Middle Ages ... assumed it would be inherited. And the vehicle of inheritance was the family, whose central institution was marriage.²

The Wife of Bath belonged to the bourgeoisie, not to the gentry. As she was lower down the social scale, although not of low birth, she was allowed more freedom of choice with later marriages. Her first three husbands were “rich and old” but as she had made her fortune through them she was able to choose with her last husband, and so married a clerk half her age *Which I took for love, and no riches* (526).

The second highly important reason for getting married was for producing children to inherit the property belonging to the family and to carry on the family name. As we have seen, the upper classes tended to marry earlier and therefore had more childbearing years in which to produce children. In the case of the Wife of Bath we are told her first three husbands were old and rich, so it would have stood to reason that they would have been keen to produce heirs. We are not told at what age she married husband number two and three, but it is probable that at least with her third husband she would have been at childbearing age even if this was not the case with the first and possibly second one. When she is defending herself for marrying so many times she actually says:

But wel I woot, expres, witute lie,
God bad for to wexe and multiplie;
That gentil text I well understonde.
Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde

¹ Laslett, P. (1983) *The World We Have Lost - Further Explored* London: Routledge, 82.

² Medcalf, S. op.cit. 232.

Sholde lete fader and mooder, and take to me.
But of no nombre mencion made he,
Of bigamie, or of octogamie;
Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynie? (27-34)

However, no mention of her having children is ever made even though she gives one of the reasons for marriage as being procreation: *God bad for to wexe and multiplie* (28). Were she chaste in her relationships with her husbands there would be more credence to the assumption that she was childless. We know she was not chaste for she tells us *I graunte it wel, I have noon envie, / Thogh maidenhede preferre bigamie. / It liketh hem to be clene, body and goost; / Of myn estaat I nil nat make no boost* (95-98). From this we can deduce that she was sexually active with her husbands. Although, as already mentioned, in real life she would probably not have been expected to maintain sexual relations with her husband if she was only twelve, she does go on to say that she was sexually active with them all:

I shall seye sooth, tho housbondes that I hadde,
As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.
The thre wee goode men, and riche, and olde;
Unnethe mighte they the statut holde
In which that they were bounden unto me.
Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee.
As help me God, I laughe when I thinke
How pitously a night I made hem swinke!
And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.
They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
Me neded nat do lenger diligence
To winne hir love, or doon hem revernce.
They loved me so well, by God above,
That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love? (195-208)

Perhaps her first three husbands were impotent, for *unnethe mighte they the statut holde / In which that they were bounden unto me* (198-199) and she goes on to say that she made them work hard at night. Furthermore, she had become rich once she had married them and so no longer felt the need to court them. She was only willing to *take trouble to provide them pleasure* if she wanted some material gain with which they could provide her.

Here is a good point at which to comment on the position of women in the household and family in Medieval England. As already mentioned, the family

was the central institution of society. The household was the main unit of activity and the family and family relationships were the chief channels through which wealth was transmitted. Within the family it was the husband who had complete authority. The male was considered superior to the female and so within marriage the wife was expected to be humble, obedient and submissive in all things. However, we know that this model did not apply to the Wife of Bath, for she nagged and manipulated her husbands in order to get what she wanted. Traditionally a woman was expected to comply with her husbands sexual demands whether she wanted to or not, whereas we know that with her first three husbands she only did so when they were willing to provide her with something in return.

Sexuality also needs to be discussed, for the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale deal with this topic in detail. A woman was not expected to have a sexuality. In the Christian world, due to interpretations of the Fall of Mankind and Eve being the cause of it for introducing sin into the world, all women were expected to atone for the original sin. The major way of doing so was through childbirth, of which I shall speak in detail later, but also through the ideal of a woman being pure, virginal and unsexed. Women were feared for being temptresses and matrimony was not considered to wholly surmount this. Virginity was the ideal. In the fourth and fifth centuries the cult of exalting the Virgin Mary appeared. She was seen as the new Eve, a virgin protected throughout life from every physical or spiritual contamination. Mary became the model of behaviour, an ideal unattainable to any other woman. Therefore, women were expected to follow her example. Sex was for procreation only, not for enjoyment. On the other hand, it is important to point out that much of the literature written for and about women in this period was largely the product of a male clerical elite anxious to promote the Church ideal of celibacy while at the same time troubled by their own feelings about sexuality, which were then projected onto women.

The Wife of Bath's attitude, then, is laughably quite the contrary. She makes no bones about her views on virginity and sex in general. Although it is not necessarily a pleasure with her first three husbands she does say:

In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument
As frely as my Makere hath it sent.
If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!

Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,
Whan that him list come forth and paye his dette.
An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacion withal
Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf. (149-157)

These are not the words of a woman who tolerates sex in order to engender children. In fact, other than her comment on God bidding man *to wexe and multiplie* (28), she never mentions that the purpose of sex is procreation. Neither does she view herself as in need of redemption for Eve's sins. On the contrary, she enjoys doing the very "crime" Eve is accused of having committed.

Although a woman was expected to be obedient and submissive, which the above shows Alisoun was not, she was, however, permitted to act as her husband's business partner and had to assume responsibility for the conduct of his affairs when he was away. She was also frequently required to act for him in a legal capacity. In this sense the Wife of Bath acts in a way that was typical of a merchant's wife. Alisoun was a cloth maker in the west of England, which at the time was a highly lucrative trade. She would have been responsible for overseeing the whole process of cloth manufacture; buying the wool, contracting the labour of the various artisans involved in manufacture, and sending bales of finished broadcloths to Bristol and London for export. Many of the women that took part in this entrepreneurial activity in England in Chaucer's day were widows, who carried on after their husband's deaths, some of them becoming extremely rich.¹

Other important factors to be taken into account when considering the evidence that exists to prove whether the Wife was or was not childless are pregnancy, childbirth and infant feeding practices. Fertility also needs to be mentioned again as this is affected by infant feeding practices, not only by age of marriage and the onset of menopause, as Medcalf suggests. Mary Carruthers's view is that there is not a shred of evidence to support the "fact" that she is childless. According to her the reason she does not mention any offspring is that Chaucer intended the text to be about wifhood, not motherhood. She adds that wifhood and motherhood were not linked concepts at

¹ Carruthers, op. cit., 24.

the time, as they are today, for wives had little to do with the nurture of their children. This is partially true and I shall develop this argument further in due course. However, it is also necessary to make clear the burden most women of the wealthier classes had to endure due to continual pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum problems, three “states” that few managed to escape from, especially those women coming from the class to which Alisoun belonged.

Returning to the comment that a woman of her class would not bring up her own children; this is true to a certain extent because her offspring would have been cared for by a wet nurse. This was common practice among wealthy and also noble families throughout western Europe in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, from the eleventh century onwards the use of wet nurses by the wealthy apparently increased. This may well have been one of the reasons for the increased fertility among the European aristocracy which also dates from this time.¹ If a mother did not breastfeed her own child she could not receive the contraceptive effects that continued, unsupplemented breastfeeding produced. Therefore, she would have become fertile possibly only weeks after the birth of a child and consequently would have become pregnant again within a short amount of time.²

As infant mortality was so high, the upper classes were probably aware of, and welcomed, an increased number of children because this would ensure sufficient infants being born, in the hope that at least some or even one would survive to inherit their parents’ property and business(es). Surely in the case of the Wife of Bath and her husbands this would also have been their aim. Yet, she only mentions her own covetousness for her husband’s goods and her own need for entertainment.

Furthermore, had she been a mother it would be most unusual for her not to mention this even though the Prologue deals with her husbands and marriage as opposed to pregnancy and parenthood. Even if she did not bring up her children herself, which admittedly she almost certainly would not have

¹ Fildes, V. (1990) *Wet Nursing - A History from Antiquity to the Present* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 34.

² Breastfeeding on demand (with no restrictions on feeding times) and with no food supplements, produces post-partum amenorrhoea, which acts as a contraceptive because it prevents a new pregnancy or at least lengthens the space of time between one pregnancy and another. (Jelliffe, D. B. and Jelliffe, P. (1978) *Human Milk in the Modern World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 117-127).

done, she would have spent a considerable amount of time pregnant, especially for the very reason that she would not have been provided with the contraceptive effects of breastfeeding.

The state of being pregnant and the after effects of childbirth would have affected her behaviour, health, sense of identity and perhaps her philosophies on life. Most mothers in the twentieth century would probably agree that once one has a child she no longer thinks solely of herself, her enjoyment or her profit because she now has a new life to answer for. It would be erroneous to suggest that a mother in England in the Middle Ages should have exactly the same attitude towards parenthood as a woman in the late twentieth century. Furthermore, the fact that infant mortality was high and that women of the wealthier classes did not breastfeed their own children might have caused mothers to have a colder, more distanced attitude towards their children.¹ But the fact remains that primordial maternal feelings had to have existed, for without them the future of a race is put in jeopardy and for this I consider that the most callous, self-interested woman would give at least a minimal reaction to becoming a mother. Furthermore, having children would have affected her relationships with her husbands and their reactions to her, but no hint of this is given in the text.

A brief look at pregnancy and childbirth in the Middle Ages reinforces what I have said above, for both states could not help but have an effect on a woman's life. As mentioned previously, women were expected to atone for Eve's sin through childbirth. The religious emphasis given to procreation and the lack of reliable contraception ensured that the lives of many women were dominated by a cycle of pregnancy and childbirth. There was little chance of special treatment, except for the restrictive kind, due to superstitions and traditional beliefs dating from the Romans and Greeks, and antenatal care was almost non-existent. Although certain herbal remedies may have been used to

¹ The close mother-child bond which forms when a newborn baby is placed on its mother's stomach and breastfeeds straight after birth, would not have taken place. Colostrum, the highly nutritious first milk, present in a mother's breasts during the first few days after birth, would not have been given to the child due to beliefs that it was unclean and dangerous. Had babies been given this, they would have had more chance of survival, as it contains antibodies which give protection against many illnesses.

help in pregnancy and childbirth there were also dangerous practices, such as bleeding, which only served to debilitate the mother.¹

So far as diet was concerned, women always fared worse than men. As the husband was considered the bread-winner and the master of the house, he always received more than anyone else. Women were served last and often consumed the worst of what was available and the least. Even pregnant women received little consideration and this lack of decent nutrition meant that some mothers were too weak to endure labour and that they gave birth to under-weight children, many of whom died before or just after birth. If we also take into account the fact that many women fasted as a religious penance, for example Margery Kempe, it is easy to see that pregnancy was beset with risks and suffering that would affect the behaviour of any woman. Yet the *Wife of Bath* makes absolutely no mention of anything concerning such experiences.

Although birth was viewed as a natural event and not a case for obstetric intervention, as it is today, a woman was aware that she could die in childbirth and she often prepared herself for this during pregnancy. Moreover, the web of superstitious beliefs that a pregnant woman had to contend with would have filled all but the most strong-minded with fear and trepidation. The Christian view of childbirth was that pain was the natural punishment for Eve's sin, thus attempts to relieve it were often condemned. This is not to say that childbirth was always a hellish experience in the Middle Ages, for, as in the twentieth century, different women must have reacted in different ways. However, due to superstition, religious beliefs, lack of nutrition and hygiene, a woman risked major problems for herself and offspring during childbirth, and these risks often resulted in the death of the infant and or the mother.

Only a woman who has not been through childbirth could choose to omit it from an autobiography. Although Alisoun's text is not exactly that, it does talk about her life and the things which she holds dear. I suggest that it is because she never went through any of these major, life changing experiences that she does not give even the slightest mention to them.

Returning to the subject of infant feeding, it is true that the *Wife of Bath* would almost definitely have employed a wet nurse and they would have

¹ Carter, J. and Duriez, T. (1986) *With Child - Birth Through the Ages* Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 19-20.

shared the same house as each other. This was common practice from the eleventh century onwards.¹ Neither was it only the highest classes that carried out this practice, for in the later Middle Ages it was established practice even for artisans and small shopkeepers to employ wet nurses. Those wealthy parents who did put their children out to nurse usually did so quite close to the child's home, so that the parents could keep in contact in case of illness or other problems. For all the above mentioned reasons I cannot agree with Carruthers in that there is no shred of evidence to prove that the Wife of Bath was not a mother.

In order to back up further my premise that Alisoun was childless and to show how very untypical she was of a woman of her age and class in the Middle Ages, I would like to give the example of Margery Kempe (c.1373 to c.1438), whose autobiography, the first ever written in English, gives us insights into the lot of a bourgeois woman in this era. Both she and the Wife of Bath were similar in that they were free to own property, run a business, and to enter a guild. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale take place while she is on a pilgrimage, although besides this religious act we are not given any reason to believe that she is a devout follower of religion. Margery, on the other hand, is devoutly religious and spends her life in search of spiritual salvation, doing penance by wearing hair shirts, going on pilgrimages as far a field as Jerusalem, and fasting. Probably one of the major differences between her and Alisoun is that Margery wants to be chaste and spends many years trying to persuade her husband to give up having sexual relations with her. Her autobiography tells us that *He would have his will and she obeyed, with great weeping and sorrowing that she might not live chaste ...*² She finally gets this wish in 1413 when, after she offers to pay his debts, he agrees to let her take the vow of chastity.³

In Margery's autobiography much emphasis is placed on her spiritual life and relatively little is written about her pregnancies and children, with the

¹ Fildes, V. (1990) *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 34-44.

² Windeatt, B.A. (trans) *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, 46.

³ Delany, S. (1975) "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature* ed., Evans, R. and Johnson, L., London: Routledge, 1994, 76-78.

exception of the birth of her first child, to which a great deal of importance is accorded in the first chapter. Even so, it is common knowledge that Margery was pregnant fourteen times. If all fourteen children were carried full term, she would have been pregnant for a total of 126 months out of 240 months, or just over half the time between her twentieth and fortieth birthdays.¹

I cite the details above to show that despite her loathing of sex, her spirituality, her pilgrimages and active life as a businesswoman in the textile trade, Margery was unable to avoid spending a large part of her life pregnant. Furthermore, we know that her first pregnancy was difficult and the birth traumatic. She was sick for eight months afterwards and was given to hysteria and visions, in which she felt herself being pawed at and threatened by devils.²

Perhaps I should reiterate before comparing Alisoun with Margery, that the Wife of Bath is a character created by Chaucer. In many ways she does not come across as real, if by this term we mean someone who is true to life, credible. There is no doubt that she is also a comical character, who succeeds in making laugh all those who read her Prologue. However, even taking into account that she is fictional and comical, perhaps if she had been created by a woman she would not have been made childless. The example of Margery Kempe shows us what the reality was for a woman of her class and age in England in the Middle Ages. Moreover, she spent over twenty childbearing years of her life married, somewhat less time than Alisoun, yet during that time she was almost continuously pregnant. The aim of her autobiography was to talk of her spiritual life, but she could not avoid giving mention, albeit scarce, to her states of pregnancy. I suggest that if the Wife of Bath had been a mother, like Margery, she could not have avoided mentioning this fact somewhere, even though her text was concerned with marriage and not motherhood. Had this been the case perhaps she would have been a more mature character and not how Robert J. Meyer views her as:

“an overgrown child - stubborn, self-centred, retentive - innocent and incapable of the emotional and intellectual sophistication, the

¹ Howes, L. (1992) *Notes and Documents On the Birth of Margery Kempe's Last Child* in *Modern Philology* vol.90 no.2 November 1992, 224, note 12.

² Evans, R. and Johnson, L. (ed) op. cit., 90-91.

unselfish and understanding, which characterize a mature love relationship.”¹

Finally a comment should be made on Alisoun’s last two husbands. Why she married her fourth husband is unclear from her prologue, but as Caruthers suggests, we may assume it had something to do with “ricchesse”, as her fifth husband, Jankyn, is the only exception she makes to this rule. We also know that by the time she is married to husband number four she is financially independent. But it is with her fifth and last husband that she marries for love and to him she gives the “maistrye” of her property. The ups and downs of this marriage are not what concern us here, but a note on his age is relevant. She is forty when she marries him and he is twenty. By this stage she may well have been going through the menopause, as Medcalf explains. However, Margery Kempe gave birth in her forty first year. Alisoun’s first four husbands were older than her and it is possible that one or a number of them were impotent or sterile. On the other hand, it is unlikely that all four of them would have been. Neither can we rule out the possibility that Alisoun was infertile and this in fact would probably be the easiest and most logical explanation if, of course, she had really existed. In the Middle Ages infertility was equated with lack of grace and consequently manuals and almanacs for the childless abounded. Despite the constant burden placed on women by pregnancy and childbirth, due to the fact that redemption was thought to come through childbirth and also because of the obsession with getting heirs, the childless woman was considered to be the most disadvantaged.² In the case of Alisoun, she comes across as childless, but never as disadvantaged because of this. In fact, children never seem to have entered her mind, which for the all the reasons cited above, would have been highly unlikely in reality.

There also remains the possibility that she had been pregnant on one or more occasions, but that she became sterile due to a miscarriage or abortion. The use of contraceptive methods need not be ruled either. Although there was a dominant set of family practices aimed at producing children the dread

¹ Meyer, R. J. "Chaucer's Tandem Romances: A Generic Approach to the Wife of Bath's Tale as Palinode" in *The Chaucer Review* vol.18, no.3 University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 232.

² Carter, J. and Duriez, T. op.cit. p. 19.

of childbirth and ill health were two reasons why women may have chosen to control their fertility.¹ In fact, McLaren points out that, in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* he tells of a woman taking potions, *drynkynge venenouse herbes thurgh which she may not conceive*; of using pessaries and suppositories, by placing *certeine material thynges in hire secree places to slee the child*; unnatural intercourse, *by which man or womman shedeth hire nature in manere or place ther as a child may not be conceived*; and even abortion.²

By looking at what the Wife of Bath says or rather does not say in her Prologue and also by reviewing the situation of women and particularly those of Alisoun's class in the Middle Ages in England, I hope to have shown the extreme improbability of her ever having had children. Had she been a real person pregnancy and childbirth, if not the birth of live children, would have been impossible to avoid for a woman as sexually active as she has informed us she was. The only possibility remaining to us, besides the unlikelihood of all her husbands being sterile, is that she herself was.

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¹ McLaren, A. (1990) *A History of Contraception - From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Oxford: Blackwell, 115.

² Chaucer, G. *Parson's Tale*, 575-6.

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