

## Wise Wyf's Remedies of Love: Birth Control in the *Wife of Bath*

Karen Harris

In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath character boasts of her expertise in the area of marriage. She speaks of the power struggles and bargaining inherent to married life. Yet she is strangely silent about one area of wifely authority – that of motherhood. Theories abound as to why the Wife of Bath is childless, if indeed she is, with scholars citing the impotency of her husbands or her own robust sexual appetite as the cause of her infertility. Still others interpret her childlessness as symbolic of her barren, materialistic life. I intend to argue that her lack of children is both a sign of and mode through which she has achieved what all women desire...sovereignty. Going one step further, however, I contend that the Wife of Bath's childlessness is the result of a deliberate choice on the part of Alisoun, and I will offer textual and historical evidence to argue that the Chaucer, via the Wife of Bath, was an early proponent of contraceptives as a tool by which women could have mastery over their own bodies reproduction, and ultimately, their husbands.

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In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, is quick to tout her expertise and experience in the area of marriage. With five husbands over the span of twenty-eight years to her credit, she demonstrates knowledge of the power struggles, mind games, and bargaining inherent to married life. In fact, there is only one area of wifely authority on which she is silent – that of motherhood. It seems she has ignored God's command "to wexe and multiplye" (28). Theories abound as to why the Wife of Bath is childless, if indeed she is. Some scholars point to the advanced age of Alisoun's first three husbands and assume them to be impotent. Others say Alisoun's hearty sexual appetite is the cause of her infertility, citing speculation that too frequent sexual encounters can be detrimental to procreation. Still, other scholars interpret the Wife of Bath's childlessness as symbolic of her barren, materialistic life. My argument will offer an alternate theory: that Alisoun's lack of children was not the result of her overblown greed or lust, as scholars who read this tale as a warning to sinful wives may contend, but in fact was the result of deliberate actions on her part to remain childless. I will offer textual evidence from within the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* and the description of her in the General Prologue, along with references within other passages of *The Canterbury Tales* and historical research to show that Chaucer was

not only aware of birth control usage among women during the late fourteenth century but was non-condemning about its moral and religious implications.

Chaucer, as author and as the narrator character in *The Canterbury Tales*, offers us an intriguing and convincing clue regarding the use of birth control in the General Prologue's description of Alisoun. He writes, "Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce" (A475). Peter G. Beidler's edition of *The Wife of Bath* glosses "remedies of love" to refer to aphrodisiacs, a potion to arouse sexual desire. Beidler's footnote of this term offers the following information: "solutions to love problems, or erotic stimulants, perhaps associated with Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*" (43). A man as well-read as Geoffrey Chaucer would no doubt be familiar with the popular *Remedia Amoris*, which offers advice for curing lovesickness. This interpretation of "remedies of love" serves to reinforce the Wife's image as a highly sexual being, breaking her lovers' hearts and her own through her numerous encounters. In fact, coupled with the next line in the poem, "For she koude of that art the olde daunce", which Beidler glosses for us as, "for she knew the old trick of the trade", some scholars have surmised that the Wife has employed well-known love potions to seduce her lovers and husbands.

Conversely, Martin Puhvel, in his article *The Wife of Bath's "Remedies of Love"*, latches onto the phrase "remedies of love" as the launching point for his argument that Alisoun has murdered her former husbands by using poisons. Puhvel notes, "At times, editors leave 'remedies' un glossed and without comment. More often they suggest the obvious but vague meaning 'cures'; some, especially earlier ones, see an allusion to Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*" (Puhvel, 307). He rightfully posits that this phrase has not garnered the academic attention that it deserves, especially given the position of this phrase as the closing of the Wife's description -- a spot typically reserved for a dramatic or climactic commentary about each pilgrim. In defense of his "poisoning" argument, Puhvel writes, "Indeed, anything but such an insinuation would seem highly anticlimactic after the poet has already informed us that she has been wedded five times, has had 'oother compaignye' in youth, and is 'gat-toothed' -- a sign of sensual disposition" (310). While Beidler and Puhvel make convincing cases for their individual interpretations, I disagree with them both. Puhvel's statement could very easily apply to my own argument that "remedies of love" is, in fact, a discreet reference to birth control methods. In fact, many of Puhvel's textual evidence focus on Chaucer's use of hints, puns or euphemisms, such as his claim that Chaucer's line from the *Wife of Bath* that reads "My dame taught me that soutiltee" (576). This implies that Alisoun's knowledge of concocting poisons was taught to her by her mother, that could readily flip to support my position.

Throughout *The Canterbury Tales* and his other works, Chaucer employs puns and word play, capitalizing on double meanings and innuendos, to offer hidden layers of meaning to his tales and, perhaps, to veil his intent, mindful of his position as a servant to

the crown. Both "that art the olde daunce"(A476) and "remedies of love" (A475), I believe, fall into this category, and rather than referring to love potions, murderous poisons, or heart-sick cures, are clever euphemisms for secretive birth control methods. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, the definition of "remedy" circa 1400, is "A means of counteracting a source of misery or difficulty; a means of relieving a bad situation or avoiding a problem" ("remedy", OED). Arguably the most pressing problem that results from love, or love making, is pregnancy. Therefore, I would offer an alternate interpretation of "remedies of love" to mean contraceptive practices. Rather than an image of a sex-crazed, unnaturally barren, bitter woman, I view the Wife of Bath as a shrewd female who uses her vast knowledge of "that art the olde daunce", or birth control techniques, to remain deliberately childless and maintain control over her own body, for, as she says, "Thou shalt nought bothe, thogh that thou were wood/Be maister of my body and of my good" (313), in order to accomplish her goals, which I will discuss later in this paper.

Reading the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* in this light allows us a different perspective from which to view her. Having already gained mastery over her own body and her own reproduction, the Wife is demonstrating that she is a controlling force within her marriages. And, in fact, this movement toward more equality in the bedroom emerged just prior to Chaucer's time, as John M. Riddle explained in his book, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, in part because of the popularity of salacious troubadour-style storytelling. It was through this literary genre that men's view of women moved away from their simply being the

submissive receiver of men's penetration and to viewing women as individuals with inherently natural and acknowledged sexual desire and drive. This trend, influenced by the popular entertainment of the time, led Riddle to ask, "If the movement was toward equal partners in sexual acts, the question becomes: did women receive more acknowledgements of rights to control pregnancy?" (142). Riddle is questioning whether use of contraceptive methods among women, at this time and in light of this prevailing attitude, was becoming more recognized and conventional. His research, ironically, indicated the opposite. The writings of scholars such as Thomas Aquinas reflect the contemporary religious position on the issue. According to Riddle, Aquinas' belief was that sexual intercourse was only bestowed upon humans as a means of procreation and any sexual activity that deviates from that end goal is a direct violation of both God's plan and nature (142). This included homosexuality, sodomy, oral sex, sex for pleasure, and, of course, any means of preventing pregnancy. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Chaucer masks his references to birth control in ambiguous wording and euphemisms.

Laurie Finke agrees with Riddle's findings in her essay, "*All is for to selle*": *Breeding Capital in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*: "Alisoun's apparent childlessness would seem to run counter to the economic importance placed on the production of heirs in the Middle Ages as well as to the religious significance of procreation as the only legitimate justification for sex in marriage" (170). Children, however, incur a certain economic liability, in and of themselves. As stated earlier, the Wife has profited from *not* producing offspring. Evidence of this can be seen in her lengthy prologue. Remaining childless has allowed the Wife to control wealth in her own name,

albeit for intermittent periods of time. As Finke reminds us "... the custom of primogeniture, a system in which the eldest son in the family inherited the family estate intake" (175) was the norm in Chaucer's time. Lee Patterson's "*Experience woot well it is noght so*": *Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* also touches on the passage of wealth from wife to husband. He writes, "The laws and customs governing martial property were quite explicit in fourteenth century England, and as a married man, Chaucer would have known them" (149). Yet, as Patterson points out, Chaucer remains somewhat unclear as to the exact nature of Alisoun's marital property transactions, whether it is a dowry, dower, or jointure. In one passage, the Wife laments that her husband has withheld her own wealth from her: "But tel me, why hidestow, with sorwe/The keyes of thy cheste away from me?/It is my good as well as thine, pardee" (308-310), and in another, it appears as though Alisoun retains ownership of her own property: "And for my land thus hastow mordred me?" (801). The first passage seems to imply a dowry, money the Wife has brought into the marriage that is now solely controlled by the husband. In the second passage, a jointure arrangement is implied. Regardless of the exact arrangement, Alisoun's wealth would, in part, upon her marriage, transfer to her husband's holding then back to her at the time of his death. A male child, if he existed, would intercept this inheritance.

In addition to retaining a controlling interest in her financial affairs, remaining childless would allow Alisoun to continue to use sex as a commodity within her relationships (both her marital relations and her extra-marital ones) without the consequences of pregnancy curtailing this bargaining tool. Pregnancy and childbirth would render their

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In addition to retaining a controlling interest in her financial affairs, remaining childless would allow Alisoun to continue to use sex as a commodity within her relationships (both her marital relations and her extra-marital ones) without the consequences of pregnancy curtailing this bargaining tool. Pregnancy and childbirth would render their

effects on her body, detracting from her beauty and sexual prowess, which in turn could negatively impact her husband-hunting activities. The burden of child-rearing would also curb Alisoun's freedoms mentioned in the General Prologue description of her. For example, the reader is told that Alisoun has made three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, travels that would surely be curtailed had the Wife been tethered by children (A463). Children may even force Alisoun to abandon her career as a weaver and businesswoman for one of domesticity.

Before I continue, however, I will address an aspect of my argument that some may consider problematic. That is the availability of contraceptives during Chaucer's time. For this portion of my argument, I rely on the research of Riddle as well as Etienne Van de Walle's article, *Marvelous Secrets: Birth Control in European Short Fiction, 1150-1650*. Drawing on textual support in several medieval manuscripts including *The Canterbury Tales*, Van de Walle argues that various birth control techniques were indeed common secrets passed from one "wise wyf" (225) to another. For both Riddle and Van de Walle, however, the term birth control is loosely defined. In addition to contraceptives to prevent pregnancy, what I would label as "remedies of love," these authors include abortion – by both surgical and medicinal means – and well as concealment of pregnancy and infanticide. In fact, many scholars have accused the Wife of Bath of being both an abortionist and baby-killer. Others posit that, as a married woman in a pre-DNA testing world, Alisoun would have no reason for preventing pregnancy. Riddle's research, however, has shown that techniques for preventing pregnancy were as important to married women as they were for promiscuous maidens. Anthropologists have noted the decrease in family size among the

poor that occurred during times of economic hardship, the overall lower birth rate among married aristocratic Renaissance women and the disproportionate number of male infants that were born during this time period. All of these factors indicate that some method was in place for limited and controlling family size. What Riddle and Van de Walle's research demonstrates is that methods of preventing unwanted pregnancies were a widespread and poorly-kept secret among women in medieval times.

But surely the narrator of *The Canterbury Tales*, a man, must be aware of these birth control secrets as he hints at them when describing Alisoun in the General Prologue; therefore, one cannot assume that the secrets of birth control were known only to women. In fact, because all of the historical and literary documentation about contraception and abortion were written by men, they were notably biased against women who would utilize birth control. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Alisoun herself reveals these secrets to the men in her company in one particular passage of her Prologue:

Ye wise wives, that kan understonde,  
Thus shul ye speke and bere hem wrong on  
honed,  
For half so boldely kan no man  
Swere and lyen as a woman kan. (225-228)

In this passage, Alisoun is acknowledging the other "wise wives" who, like her, are adept at deception. She oddly addresses this passage specifically to wives. This is noteworthy because Alisoun is the only wife among the pilgrims, but then, one could reasonably argue that, as a widow, she herself is also not a wife. In Chaucer's time, the word "wif", however, was not strictly reserved as a term for married women and, as Beidler tell us, was used interchangeably with the word "woman" (42). Therefore, when Alisoun addresses her audience as "Ye wise wives", she may be including all

females in attendance, including the Prioress and Nuns, despite their unmarried and virginal status. Of course, effective birth control would be a more urgent issue for sexually active unwed women, particularly members of the clergy. We may find this shocking, but interestingly, Van de Walle's article includes passages from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, an Italian work written in the mid-1350s which some scholars contend was well-known to Chaucer. In one *Decameron* tale, nuns are utilizing birth control methods to hide their extra-curricular activities (326). But what is also intriguing about this passage from *The Wife of Bath* is Chaucer's choice of the word "bere", which he is using in Line 226 to mean "burden him with false blame". Another definition of the word "bere", as outlined in the Oxford English Dictionary Online, pertains to the act of bearing children ("bear", OED), thus "bere hem wrong" could alternately refer to withholding children from a husband. The passage concludes with the admission that these "wise wives" are adept at keeping their secrets hidden.

Viewing Alisoun as a woman in full control of her body and her reproductive rights also allows us to interpret the ending to her Tale through this unique lens. However, before we review this portion of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, let us return to Laurie Finke's essay in which she outlines medieval inheritance customs. She explains, "The legitimacy of the heir must be assured at any cost, and the cost is invariably the wife's sexual liberties. The wife who will produce the heir must be a virgin at marriage and she must have only one sexual partner throughout the marriage" (175). What she is telling us is that only the absoluteness of a wife's fidelity ensures that an estate will not pass to an illegitimate son. At the conclusion of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the old hag offers the Knight, her new

husband, a choice: he could have her young, beautiful but unfaithful or old, ugly and chaste. The Knight allows her to choose, thus relinquishing sovereignty to her and his reward is a wife who has made herself suitable for bearing him an heir – she transforms to a maiden of childbearing age with the promise of unwavering faithfulness. In this case, the old hag retains control of her reproduction until she determines the appropriate circumstances for bringing forth children. Had the Knight selected either of the old hag's original two options – old and chaste or young and unfaithful – a legitimate heir would not be produced.

The *Wife of Bath* is not the only tale within *The Canterbury Tales* in which Chaucer alludes to contraceptive practices. That these examples are numerous should lend credence to my theory about birth control within the *Wife of Bath*. In fact, throughout the poem, Chaucer has included hints and references to nearly all categories of contraception, from abstinence, to non-fertile sex, to infanticide, to birth control and abortion. For example, the Prioress, as dictated by her position as a member of the clergy, is an avowed celibate. As a possible homosexual, the Pardoner's sexual activity with other men is clearly not procreative in nature.

Chaucer includes infanticide in *The Clerk's Tale* about the obedient Grisilde. Before we look at a passage from this tale, it is important to understand the concept of infanticide in Chaucer's day. Let us return to Riddle's book in which he writes, "Infanticide is the explanation for population limitations before 1750 that commands the greatest attention among scholars. Ancient law protected neither the fetus nor the newborn infant until there was acceptance by the parents" (10). In *The Clerk's Tale*, Grisilde has given birth to a



child, a female, and her cruel husband Walter, in a test of his wife's obedience, sends his henchman to Grisilde, telling her Walter has not accepted the child and has ordered it to be killed. According to Riddle, the most common method for infanticide was exposure, abandoning the defenseless baby in the wild, exposing it to the elements and predators. Grisilde shows familiarity with this method as she implores the henchman:

Goth now," quod she, "and dooth my lords heste. But o thing will I preye yow of youre grace, That, but my lord forbad yow. Ate leste Burieth this litel body in som place That bestes ne no brides it torace." (568-572)

Modern readers are surprised that Grisilde does not exhibit shock or surprise at her husband's request, which seems to indicate her awareness of this common practice of her day. She seems to hint at exposure as the method of infanticide when she shows concern that the beasts and birds may tear the newborn's body to pieces. That Walter has ordered the infant's murder, that Grisilde responds with sadness rather than shock, and that exposure is implied all demonstrate Chaucer's awareness of infanticide. What we don't see in this passage is a condemnation of the practice. Rather, he seems accepting of this method of birth control, as he also does with the *Wife of Bath's* contraceptive practices.

Carol Falvo Heffernan, in her article *Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode of Chaucer's Merchant's Tale*, argues that scholars, when analyzing the *Merchant's Tale*, have overlooked the fact that pears were once believed to have contraceptive properties. She writes, "As with so much else in medieval science, Chaucer appears to have had knowledge of the prevailing practices of his day regarding contraception and abortion" (34). For her, it is not a question *if* Chaucer was knowledgeable about birth control practices; it is more a

question of *how* Chaucer incorporates this knowledge into his tales. And, like Van de Wall, Heffernan notes similarities to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which references to birth control, infanticide and abortion are more overt than in *The Canterbury Tales*, particularly the similarities between one story in the *Decameron* and the pear tree scene in *Merchant's Tale*. In this tale, Chaucer places the licentious May in a garden with her blind and elderly husband, January, and her lover Damien, secreted in a pear tree. Just before her coupling with Damian, she speaks of the pears to her husband:

I telle you wel, a woman in my plyt  
May han to fruit so greet an appetyt  
That she may dyen but, she of it have (2335-2338)

First, Heffernan finds it significant that May would choose to eat a pear right before having sexual intercourse and that, by having this character do so, Chaucer may have signified to his readers that May was engaging in non-procreative sex, thus making her immoral behavior even more immoral. Here, I would like to draw attention to Chaucer's use of the word "plyt" which V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson's edition of the *Canterbury Tales* glosses as "condition (implying pregnancy)" (209). The Oxford English Dictionary Online defines this word to have a more negative connotation, meaning "an unfortunate condition or state" ("plyt", OED). If indeed Chaucer is implying that May is pregnant, what is the reader to make of the reference to this as a negative? Before answering this, I will more closely examine the second and third line of this passage. Taken as an isolated statement the line "May han to fruit so greet an appetyt" could be a direct statement about May, the character, and her sexual drive -- May's urge to do the activity that will cause her to be fruitful is great. The last line, however, reminds the reader of the dangers of some birth control methods, and

indeed, the risks of pregnancy itself – she may die if she has it. Therefore, Chaucer is alternatively telling us that May is wise in choosing to consume the pear before her intimacy with Damian. Returning to the previous question, May's "plyt" is most likely one of Chaucer's infamous double meanings. While on the surface, it could mean that May is, in fact, pregnant, (and January assumes this as he strokes her womb) or it could conversely mean that she is either in the unfortunate state of being pregnant with another man's child, or she must prevent pregnancy from occurring when engaged in her extra-marital exploits.

If *The Parson's Tale* is to be read as Chaucer's views on current societal issues, as some scholars would have us do, then we do have a glimmer into Chaucer's attitude about contraception that may provide us with a clue as to why Chaucer created Alisoun as a woman in control of her reproduction. In *The Parson's Tale*, we see commentary on the role of a wife and Chaucer tells us "Thanne shal men understonde that for three things a man and his wfy fleshly mowen assemble" (Kolve and Olson, 304). This is significant because, as we learned from Thomas Aquinas, the religious position of the day was that sex within marriage was for one reason alone, procreation. Of the three reasons listed, Chaucer does place procreation at the top. He writes in *The Parson's Tale*, "The firste is in entente of engendrure of children to the service of God, for certes that is the cause final of matrimoine" (Kolve and Olson, 304). The second reason Chaucer states is to give into carnal desire for, he writes, "neither of hem hath power over his owene body" (Kolve and Olson, 305). The final reason is that, Chaucer believes, a healthy and satisfying marital sex life will prevent men from being lured into wicked lechery, a gateway to other sins.

The humble yet learned country parson expounds on various sins within his tale, including murder. Interestingly, he categorizes murder into four levels, ranked by their severity. Abortion, infanticide, and the use of birth control techniques he classifies in the fourth level, the least heinous of all types of homicide. Judith Shaw, in her article *Corporeal and Spiritual Homocide, the Sin of Wrath, and the Parson's Tale*, explains, "Where we are promised 'foure maneres' of homicide in deed, we get only three, while in place of the anticipated fourth category we find a discussion of the various forms of infanticide, contraception, and abortion. Although Chaucer identifies these as types of homicide, they hardly comprise a major classification to rank alongside the other three 'maneres'" (281). This, in and of itself, tells us that Chaucer, while knowledgeable about various forms of birth control methods, is not denouncing the practice. In fact, Chaucer simultaneously implies that abortion, infanticide, and contraception are classified as a less sinful form of homicide and that they are commonly accepted practices. Chaucer knows he is touching a clerical nerve by including references to non-procreative sexual practices (especially in a non-condemning fashion) within the *Canterbury Tales* and back-peddles a bit in the Retraction he places at the end of his tales. In it he writes:

Wherfore I biseke you mekely,  
for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me,  
that Crist have mercy on me  
and foryeve me my giltes and  
namely of my translacions and endytinges  
of worldly vanitees,  
the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns (Kolve  
and Olson, 306).

The use of the phrase "translacions and endytinges," which Kolve and Olson gloss as "compositions" (306) shows that Chaucer has translated and rewritten many of his tales from sources, including perhaps

Baccaccio's *Decameron*. I feel Chaucer's reminder that many of the *Canterbury Tales* was not his original work and his attempt to revoke the "worldly vanitees" he included in his poem is his way of distancing himself as a person who relies on the patronage of the court from the critical commentary he has written. Yet, I find Chaucer's retraction to be highly sarcastic in nature, given the critical social observations threaded through the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in regards to the Wife of Bath and this character's use of contraception.

In addition to being a keen observer of the world in which he lived, Geoffrey Chaucer masterfully wove in both commentary and criticism of the complex social structure of medieval England into *The Canterbury Tales* with creative, yet ambiguous wording

that lends itself to various interpretations. A close look at the textual evidence within the pages of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, in addition to the General Prologue description of The Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*, does indicate the possibility that Chaucer was including "remedies of love", secretive birth control techniques, as one such topic of scrutiny and that he understood that, for women, gaining mastery over their bodies and their reproduction was a step toward gaining mastery in marriage. Perhaps this is why he does not seem to pass judgment on those who practice birth control, but instead remarks on it as a casual observer.

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