Sovereignty and Marriage in The Franklin’s Tale and The Wife of Bath’s Tale

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Franklin’s Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer portray various forms of romantic love in which the question of sovereignty plays a crucial role. *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* contains marriages in which manipulation is used for Alisoun and her husbands to achieve their goals. In her fifth marriage, however, a mutuality is achieved which leads to a marriage that is beneficial to both husband and wife. *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* explores women’s desire for sovereignty while *The Franklin’s Tale* expands upon whether sovereignty and mutuality is idealistic or compatible with marriage under daily stress.

In *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* Alisoun is ‘contemptuous of the obedience and loyalty preached by authority’ (Patterson 141) and refuses to assume the role of an inferior wife in her first three marriages. The Wife admits she would ‘chyde’ her husbands (III. 419) and believes that women are naturally able to weep and deceive (III. 401) in order to manipulate their husbands and gain the upper hand. This manipulation extended to the marriage bed where the Wife would withhold intercourse until they had ‘maad his raunson’ (III. 411) by giving in to what the Wife wanted. Though at first it may appear the Wife’s first husbands grant her ‘hir lond and hir tresoor’ (III. 204) as a way of satisfying her desire for autonomy it can be argued that these gifts are an attempt to satiate Alisoun and win sexual favours. Similarly, Retha Knoetze argues that Alisoun weaponises her sexuality as a means of achieving ‘economic empowerment and some form of personal agency within a restrictive patriarchal context’ (38). Yet in these marriages Alisoun does not possess sovereignty over

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her husbands, rather they trade possessions and a degree of autonomy for sexual favours – a compromise that allows both parties to hold a degree of power over the other.

Unlike her previous husbands, Jankyn would not give Alisoun everything she desired despite her giving him the land and property bequeathed by her previous husbands (III. 630-3). Her fifth marriage begins with the potential to be mutually beneficial but Jankyn’s obsession with reading from the Book of Wikked Wyves creates tension and distrust. Following the physical altercation which ensues Alisoun is given mastery within the marriage and it is then that she treats Jankyn with the kindness expected from wives. Knoetze (42) and Patterson (141) argue that what Alisoun truly desires is reciprocity rather than sovereignty within the marriage. I concur with this reading of the Prologue as Alisoun does not use the power Jankyn grants her against him, nor does she attempt to use manipulation to achieve her goals as demonstrated in her previous marriages. Instead, through his granting of free will Jankyn is rewarded with a kind and faithful wife. Alisoun rebels against her husband’s wishes until trust is placed upon her to make the decision regarding the nature of her marriage. While it can be argued that Alisoun’s main desire is sovereignty in marriage, her actions reveal that what she truly desires is a mutually beneficial relationship with greater freedoms, and not one in which women’s agency is constrained by patriarchal stereotypes.

Within The Wife of Bath’s Tale there are two depictions of marriage: Arthur and the queen, and the knight and old woman. The king grants the queen the power ‘to chese whethre she wolde him save or spille’ (III. 898) following the knight’s act of rape. Whether this act is an example of equality within the marriage, or of the king delegating ‘women’s issues’ to his wife it does show that the king trusts his wife to make an appropriate decision. It is an example of a marriage in which the husband takes into account his wife’s desire and grants her agency, similar to the relationship between Alisoun and Jankyn once he acknowledges her as an equal partner.
While on the quest to discover ‘What thing is it that wommen most desyren’ (III. 905) the knight find that what women want most is ‘sovereyntee’ over their husbands (III. 1038-40). When the old woman presents the knight with the choice between having a young, beautiful and unfaithful wife or an ugly, faithful and doting wife the knight allows her to make the choice for him (III. 1219-35). By placing himself under his wife’s ‘wyse governance’ (III. 1231) he grants her sovereignty and is rewarded for it by having a wife who is both beautiful and loyal. By granting his wife sovereignty, a relationship of mutuality is established. I agree with Knoetze interpretation which argues that while sovereignty may be what women want the acknowledgement of the husband’s and the wife’s desire is what make a marriage successful (50).

In contrast to these portrayals of marriage is the union between Arveragus and Dorigen. G.L. Kitteridge argued that (467) ‘a better [marriage] has never been devised or imagined’ (467). Arveragus wins Dorigen’s affections through act of chivalry and vows that he will ‘take no maistrye’ (V. 747) in and ‘obey and folwe hir wil in all’ (V. 749) with the exception of displaying ‘soveraynetee’ in public so that it would not ‘shame in his degree’ (V. 750-1). Mann argues that this demonstrates a flexible relationship (90) while Hume notes that his public role offers no room for flexibility due to concern for his reputation (285). In the public sphere Arveragus adheres to strict gender roles so Weisl argues that Dorigen’s power in the private sphere is an illusion because it is incompatible with romance (106).

In return for Arveragus’ gift of sovereignty, Dorigen vows to be a ‘humble trewe wyf’ (V. 758). The initial course of their marriage is idyllic with the combination of roles undertaken by husband and wife providing a more egalitarian marriage. Similar to the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, it is recognised that women desire liberty (V. 768) and the ability not to be constrained by servitude (V. 769). This arrangement awarded the couple a year of bliss until Arveragus went to England. During that period, after Dorigen laments her
husband’s absence, Aurelius confesses his love for her. Though she is faithful to her husband, in an attempt to ease Aurelius’ heartbreak promises that if he achieves the impossible task of removing the rocks from the coast of Brittany then he will gain her love. Against the odds Aurelius completes the task and Dorigen waits for the return of her husband before deciding how to deal with the situation. This can be interpreted as either an act of dependence upon her husband, or a display of her respect for his guidance as the matter concerns both of them.

The mutuality of their idyllic relationship is tested when Arveragus’ respect for Dorigen’s ‘trouthe’ and instance that she uphold it through threat of death contradicts his previous promise to ‘take no maistrye’. Through this Arveragus encroaches his public act of patriarchal dominance into the private mutuality of their marriage (Hume 299). Both Arveragus and Dorigen are at fault for their situation, yet their imperfection arose from their well-meaning love. Following Aurelius’ dismissal of Dorigen’ promise, mutuality is restored in the marriage and while neither is capable of living up to their ideals –Dorigen fails to remain true to her husband and Arveragus fails to not display mastery – they are granted an optimistic ending. It can be concluded that while a marriage based on mutuality is ideal it cannot withstand the pressures of everyday life.

While the Wife of Bath demonstrates that women can act as valuable counsellors to their husbands, the Franklin demonstrates that it is beneficial for husbands and wives to consult one another. The former implies that while women desire sovereignty within a marriage it is the acknowledgement of what husbands and wives both want that makes a marriage more beneficial. Similarly, the Franklin reveals that while a mutually beneficial relationship based upon equality is idyllic and blissful it is unable to withstand the pressures of a patriarchal society. Nevertheless the Franklin concludes that when mutuality is restored and it is acknowledged that certain ideals are unable to be upheld then a marriage can be successful.
Neither marriage in the two Tales is constructed in the same way—the knight is forced into a marriage with the old woman after an unchivalrous act, while Arveragus wins Dorigen’s heart through displays of chivalry—they conclude with similar circumstances in which both couples acknowledge the desires of their partners and take them into consideration. Sovereignty within the marriage in the private sphere of the home does not clearly belong to either the husband or the wife, yet both are in control of their own autonomy and when used in consideration of their partner’s desire marriage portrayed to be mutually beneficial.

Works Cited


