

**UNIVERSITY of GLASGOW, School of Critical Studies
ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LINGUISTICS 1B (ENGLANG1003)**

HOME ESSAY COVER SHEET (Essay due by Tuesday 16th March 2021,
3pm)

Student ID Number: 2467273

Date of Submission: 14.03.2021

Word count: 1270

NB. Any footnotes should be included in the word count. Your works cited list is not included in the word count.

Checklist: before submission, ensure that you have:

- cited at least three sources of information
- followed the citation practice outlined in Good Style
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The Essay Question:

What do we learn about Alisoun from the way she is described and the words she speaks in *The Miller's Tale*? You might wish to consider features of style, grammar, diction, imagery, figurative language and rhyme. Discuss also what the depiction of Alisoun reveals about the Miller's attitude towards love.

Your answer should include some consideration of the historical, literary and linguistic contexts for Chaucer's writings. Your answer should give specific examples from The Miller's Tale of how Chaucer exploited the resources of Middle English for particular literary effects (such as irony, humour, wordplay and characterisation). You may also wish to refer to the Miller's Prologue.

The Essay:

The Miller's Tale stands as a complex, intelligent, intimate, and natural contrast to *The Knight's Tale*, both *Tales* comprising the very first stories told in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. The central symbol of *The Miller's Tale* is Alisoun, the desire of every male character. The Miller's Alisoun, contrary to the Knight's Emelye, is progressively feminine – a woman displaying not only courtly and sexual features, but also ones of family, intelligence, intimacy, and even masculinity. Her description and speech, being narrated by the Miller, unveil his own view of love as being natural, caring, universal, complex, and consensual, which is the direct opposite of female idealisation and the myth of female perfection being portrayed in *The Knight's Tale*.

The most noticeable aspect of Alisoun's portrayal is the overabundance of natural imagery used to paint her as 'a desirable natural object' (Miller, 200, p. 4), such as the similes and metaphors 'wezele' (Chaucer, c. 1400-1410) (*The Tale*: 126)¹, 'morne milk' (128), 'pere-jonette tree' (140), and 'a prymerole, a piggesnye' (160). These objectifying terms, although not progressive by modern standards, achieve the Miller's goal of rebuking the Knight's tale by rendering Alisoun as a natural being who exists independently on her own and is not created by men, the narrators of these stories. Chaucer's wordplay with the word 'bryd' (591), coming from the lips of Absolon, Alisoun's suitor, yields to a 'bride' interpretation as Absolon's lines echo the Song of Songs, as well as calling Alisoun a bird (Leicester, 1994, p. 493), thus strengthening the link between femininity and nature in

¹ Hereafter referenced only with the appropriate line from *The Miller's Tale*.

the Miller's narrative. Alisoun, symbolically representing love, reveals that the Miller's view of love is that of a simple nature, i.e., something that happens naturally and is not achievable exclusively by courting and seduction. Furthermore, the view of love as natural is also explored with the theme of family underlying Alisoun's portrayal: she is described as childlike in her appearance and behaviour by being depicted as a 'wylde and yong' (117), and 'wynsyngre' (155) (energetic) child who likes to 'skippe and make game' (151). These childlike qualities expose more of the Miller's view of love as also caring, parental (Leicester, 1994, p. 484), as does Absolon's self-descriptive simile of 'a lamb after the tete' (596) in a less direct way. Therefore, the Miller intertwines nature and family in his description of Alisoun, thus exposing the Knight's constrained view of love and offering a more in-depth exploration of his own.

Another way the Miller contrasts the Knight's view of love is by further developing the inclusivity of love with the complex portrayal of Alisoun as belonging to a mix of classes. Her expensive clothes, e.g., 'a purs of lether, / Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun' (142-3) and the embroidery on her smock (130), symbolic of the upper class and nobility and acting as a link between Alisoun and Emelye, intermingle with clothes characteristic of the lower class, e.g., a 'smok' (130) and a 'barmclooth' (128) (apron), which help set her role and status in the narrative, suggest a character full of inexplicable dualities, further supported by the only colours in her portrait being either 'col-blak' (132) or 'whit as morne milk' (128). Additionally, Chaucer amplifies the duality of classes present in Alisoun by playing with the dual forms of politeness characteristic of Middle English in Alisoun's speech: when surprised by Nicholas, the student who later seduces Alisoun, she uses the informal form of *you* in her exclamation 'I wol nat kisse **thee**, by my fey!' (176) and later realises her mistake and shifts between registers by using the polite form while crying 'Do wey **youre** handes, for **youre** curteisye!' (179). This intelligent display of register shifting by Chaucer helps see Alisoun as a complex human being not constrained by her social class but dynamically switching between them, i.e., more than just an archetype. By extension, the Miller portrays love as a universal phenomenon not belonging to any one class but shared among all of them: love that can

be both 'deerne' (92), or secret and courtly, and 'trewe' (584), or simple and natural. Whereas *The Knight's Tale* is meant for the eyes and/or ears of a very specific audience, the Miller speaks to a myriad of audiences (Popescu, 2016, p. 34) by satirising courtly love and exemplifying simple, lower-class love in many of its complexities.

A further examination of the complex characteristics of Alisoun leads to an almost feminist perspective. Firstly, the very first and most significant portrait of Alisoun in lines 125-162, narrated by the Miller, is characteristic of the so-called "male gaze" in feminist theory as Alisoun is described from head to toe and to head again. However, when Alisoun becomes privy to the same sort of gaze from Absolon, she herself decides to control her narrative by deceiving Absolon into kissing her behind. Thus, Alisoun is shown as an autonomous character 'by asserting her own gloss of her body's language' (Donaldson, 1992, p. 150). This autonomy is further exemplified by Alisoun's rejection of her husband keeping her 'narwe in a cage' (116), from which she breaks free by infidelity. Thus, the Miller sees love as consensual and voluntary (Aloni, 2006, p. 167), i.e., a feeling expressed by two autonomous beings. Secondly, there are many masculine aspects found in Alisoun that portray her as more than just a gendered role, like the comparison of her to 'a wether' (141), a male sheep, at the very start of her description. Additionally, in the vivid 'shot-wyndowe' (587) scene, Absolon confuses Alisoun's pubic hair with a 'berd' (629), a universal symbol of masculinity and also an opportunity for Chaucer to play with the complexities of narration as Nicholas, a character who has not heard the beard comparison in Absolon's thoughts, still comments on it (Leicester, 1994, p. 487). This confusion of orifices extends the humour of the scene (Bishop, 2002, p. 239), but it also implies an understanding of love not just as courtly and beautiful, represented by Absolon's intended orifice, i.e., lips for kissing, but also as indecent and bodily, represented by the 'ers' (626) or 'queynte' (167), which is used as a source of punning throughout the tale. When Nicholas replaces Alisoun and tries to emulate her deception of Absolon, Absolon strikes him with a 'hoote kultour' (704), which also acts as a pun on the Middle English-equivalent of the word *poker* and the Middle English *cule*, meaning *buttock* (Walls, 2019, p. 29). The humour in this scene is directed at Nicholas, the victim,

who tries to replace Alisoun, i.e., the one in charge in the first instance of the shot-window trickery. Thus, Alisoun, the feminine, is portrayed as superior when compared to the man, the masculine, who tries to replace her and fails (Forbes, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, the Miller's view of love could be interpreted as being flexible enough to support a flexible power dynamic in a relationship, where the man is not always the one in power.

In conclusion, Alisoun's portrayal as both a lower-class and wild girl of nature and an independent and dominating woman with masculine traits gives a magnitude of hints on how the Miller sees love as natural, universal, consensual, and complex. Chaucer, by exploiting the wide arsenal of wordplay, figurative language, registers, and voices available in Middle English, paints a picture of progressive femininity in *The Miller's Tale*, which stands out from the simple base of a scatological and bawdy fabliau and is raised higher than that.

Bibliography

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