

Women in the Middle Ages

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In the middle ages, the typical woman would not have had the freedom to do what she wanted; she would have to obey the male members of her family. This included her husband, brothers, uncles and even her own sons (<http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/>). However, there were many women who did not fall under this category of typical women and would manipulate, control or disobey the men around them giving them more power. In "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer we have Emelye from "The Knight's Tale" (KT) who would be considered the typical women and Alison from "The Miller's Tale" (MT) who would not be. It is due to their personalities, their social classes and their actions or surroundings which causes their lives to turn out very differently.

Emelye and Alison have very different personalities, which is reflected by how they treat men. Palamon describes Emelye by the passage, "And fressher than the May with floures newe, for with the rose colour stroof hire hewe, I noot which was the fairer of hem two" (27, 1048-1055, KT). This reference along with other references strongly link Emelye to the month of May. This highlights her positive personality as well as purity because all good things in this tale occur in May, and it is considered to be a beautiful month. Also, when Emelye went to the Temple of Dianna (53-55, 2273-2366, KT) she asked if she could remain a virgin and when she was denied of this she asked for the one who loved her most to win her hand in marriage. This suggests a type of innocence to her as well as the kindness, care and compassion that she possesses towards the men around her. All these together demonstrate that she would not want to even attempt to control men and that she would be satisfied being a typical woman. On the opposite hand, we have Alison described by the passage, This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf

Which that he lovede more than his lyf;
Of eightetene yeer she was of age.
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
For she was wilde and yong, and he was old
And demed himself ben lyk a cokewold.

74, 3221-3226, MT

This gives an idea of her personality mainly by the words wild and young. This gives an image of a pretty typical eighteen year old girl of our time (as opposed to a typical girl at that time) who loves to go out, party and meet boys. Since she is married to someone older who may not be able to satisfy her needs and that confines her to their house with the exception of church, it is made to seem very likely based on her personality that she would disobey him and possibly use his great love for her against him so as to not get in trouble. It is even stated in the passage that this relationship would likely lead to him being cuckolded. This demonstrates that she would likely not allow herself to be a typical woman of that time. We see here, just based on their personalities alone, that they are quite different from each other in respect to being a typical woman.

These two women essentially lived in different worlds because they were from different social classes. Emelye is the sister of Hippolyta who had become a queen after marrying Theseus (23-24, KT). This

means that she was of the upper class (nobility) and was expected to act a certain way. This expectation is them being the typical women by obeying the men around them so as to not shame them or make them look less powerful. These "rules" would be quite strict because a higher class woman is seen by many, therefore any disobedience or misbehavior would result in a lot of chatter amongst the upper and lower class. It seems likely that Emelye would follow these "rules" because of her personality as mentioned above, which may have come from the way she was raised in this type of setting. Alison married "A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord, And of his craft he was a carpenter" (73, 3188-3199, MT). Her husband being a wealthy carpenter means that they are the upper end of the lower class but part of the lower class (peasants) none the less. Although women of the lower class were still expected to act a certain way, it had to do more with the chores they needed to do and less to do with upholding the image of a typical woman because their actions were noticed by fewer people (<http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/>). This means some of them were able to use this leniency in respect to being a typical woman and flip it in order to benefit themselves, as Alison did. Also, the fact that she is younger might of even added some additional leniency since her husband was worried about being cuckolded and might not of focused on other aspects as much. So, not only did these women differ from being a typical woman but they were raised in different environments that impacted their lifestyle greatly as well.

Both characters have an experience that they have no control over, and it is their actions as well as their surroundings which play a big role in how the women differ from one another. With Emelye, it was mainly because she was the ideal "target" for courtly love due to her nobility and the fact that she wanted to remain a virgin or remain unattached; the two main conditions required in courtly love. This resulted in Palamon as well as Arcite falling in love with her (28-29, KT), fighting each other and all that took place actually taking place. It is important to notice that Alison is not the ideal "target" for courtly love because she falls under neither of the conditions, therefore Palamon and Arcite would not have fallen in love with her, which means there would have been no story to tell. With Alison, her personality showed that she would cuckold her husband and when the chance arises with Nicholas living in the house with her (73, 3190, MT) and grabbing her crotch (75, MT), she takes it. This attests to her personality as stated above. She also uses her husband's foolishness, Nicholas' want for her and Absolon's flirting with her (77-78, MT) to essentially play a game with the end goal being her own amusement. This was done due to her increased power over these men. It is important to notice that if Emelye were in the place of Alison, her personality shows that she would stay loyal to her husband and the story would not have taken place. Since KT is a romance/tragedy and MT is a comedy, it makes sense that the respective characters could not switch places.

In conclusion, Emelye and Alison are different mainly because of their personalities, their social classes and their actions as well as surroundings. These tremendous differences between each other result in little to no similarities between them. Essentially, their differences spring from their relationships towards men; Emelye is for serving them, respecting them and believes in a relationship based on love where as Alison is against all that and rather toy with them both physically and sexually for personal gain. Each of these women fall on opposite extremes of Medieval or Middle Age femininity and as a result give a general picture of women during this time.