Jot & Tittle

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THE WIFE OF BATH[1]

The Wife of Bath was dreamed up by Geoffrey Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales more than 600 years ago. She has captured countless imaginations since. The character known for her lusty appetites, gossipy asides and fondness for wine has influenced authors, artists and musicians over the centuries including William Shakespeare and James Joyce.

Marion Turner is the J. R. R. Tolkien Professor of English Literature and Language at the University of Oxford. In her new book, *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* (Princeton University Press 2023), she argues that Chaucer's pilgrim, whose given name is Alison, is the first modern character in all of English literature. Chaucer gives her more to say than any other character. She has a sense of her own subjectivity, her faults and foibles. Alison seems - well, real. Turner points out, Alison has been married five times, she has worked in the cloth industry, she has travelled all over the known world at that time. Unlike the queens and witches who preceded her in English literature, Alison is not a flat allegorical figure. Her ordinariness makes her radical.

She tells us about domestic abuse. She tells us about rape. She tells us about what it's like to live in a society where women are comprehensively silenced. Turner, who previously wrote a well-regarded biography of Chaucer, puts the Wife of Bath in the context of actual women who found ways to prosper in the aftermath of the Black Death, which upended social norms and created new pathways for women to work and hold authority. It's astonishing, when you find out about women such as the 15th century duchess who marries four times, and her last husband was a teenager when she was 65. Or the woman in London who was twice Lady Mayoress and inherits huge amounts of money. Other London women who run businesses are skinners, blacksmiths, or own ships.

It appears that not only have women been silenced throughout our history but have also been omitted from it altogether in places. At the very least, we should respect and honour the women in our lives today by recognising and valuing the women in our history.

MEDIEVAL WIDOWS

It has been conservatively estimated that widows were in charge of 10% of all medieval households. Widowhood was in fact anticipated at marriage with a *dower* (or share), giving a woman rights over her husband's property, often calculated at a third. Goods and chattels were also calculated as a third and referred to as *legitim*. One third was set aside for children and one third for the benefit of the dead man's soul. Although this was the common law it did not mean that all widows received it, especially if a male heir objected - from 1227 to 1230 the king's court heard almost 500 suits concerning the dower.

Rich widows along with under-age heirs and heiresses became wards of court and a valuable asset. The king could give them in marriage to whomever he pleased and collect a hefty *fine* for each one. King John made a great deal of money by unscrupulously milking this law and as a consequence, clauses 7 and 8 were added to Magna Carta:

At her husband's death, a widow may have her marriage portion and inheritance at once and without trouble. She shall pay nothing for her dower, marriage portion, or any inheritance that she and her husband held jointly on the day of his death. She may remain in her husband's house for forty days after his death, and within this period her dower shall be assigned to her. No widow shall be compelled to marry, so long as she wishes to remain without a husband.

Widows could choose not to remarry by becoming a *vowess*. This involved taking a vow of chastity before a bishop and wearing clothing similar to that worn by a nun. A widow who took on her husband's business could be recognised as a *femme sole* and accepted as being independent. In London it was estimated that some 50% of widows remained unmarried although only 3% of wills stated that the widow should not remarry. As many widows ran their late husband's businesses and even invested in ships, quite a few gained *freedom of the city*, a crucial status granting the right to trade, have apprentices and conduct business within the Square Mile. It was closely tied to the city's medieval trade guilds.

Poor widows could opt for *beguinage*, a life of religious devotion without taking vows or else accept the charity of a hospice or almshouse. (Below, the Great Beguinage at Leuven in Belgium). The Black Death adversely affected widows as staff and labourers were hard to find. This drove many to look for husbands, but of course they too were scarce. Also, land became so cheap that the widow's dowry went down in value.

So, not all widows were like the Wife of Bath, and as we can see, there were many rules in place to both control and take advantage of women. But becoming a widow could be considered a safe and desirable position in society – unless, of course, you were poor.

AN IDEAL GOVERNMENT

Aristotle once asked the students of his Academy to compile a list of the different governments in the region. During Aristotle's lifetime in Greece (384 - 322BCE) there were 158 identifiable regimes, and the students were tasked to work out their various benefits and faults. Analysing the results, Aristotle came up with this table. The Perverted column shows what each system will eventually become, if left to fallible human nature.

You will note that Aristotle considered Democracy to be a fault. This was because an uneducated majority could easily be led by *Demagogues*, (not that we would know anything about that). What he opted for was the *Polis* (from where we get the word politics), which took democracy and added the election of roles that required technical expertise (e.g. military and financial). The whole was underpinned with four key principles: 1) Moderation, 2) A strong middle class, 3) An independent judiciary and 4) Education for all.

No. of Rulers	Ideal	Perverted
One	Monarchy	Tyranny
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many	Polity	Democracy

For the model to work it needs for Education to be the top priority and a strong middle class to balance the aristocracy/super rich and the 'tyranny of the poor'. The judges should be able to adapt the law but not the basic principles. Nothing in Excess as the Delphic Oracle put it. Aristotle's logic certainly sounds applicable to our modern world, but we should remember that he lived in a society with misogynistic attitudes to women and most of the work being carried out by slaves. It was the slaves that gave the educated Athenians time to think about politics. If students carried out the same exercise today, I wonder what the result would be?

IRON BREW[4]

You may recall the article in J&T No.167 about iron gall ink used for writing on parchment. A cabinet-maker reader wrote the following: 'This is almost identical to iron buff which is used for ebonising in woodwork finishing. I made it by soaking steel wool in vinegar for a few days (longer for a more powerful solution) then straining and filtering. This was brushed on the surface of wood where it reacted with the tannin to darken the timber. It works best with oak which has a high tannin level and would usually turn black and being a chemical reaction it's very lightfast.'

THE BARGAIN MAGNA CARTA[5]

In 1946 Harvard Law School acquired a cheap copy of Magna Carta which now turns out to be an extremely rare original.

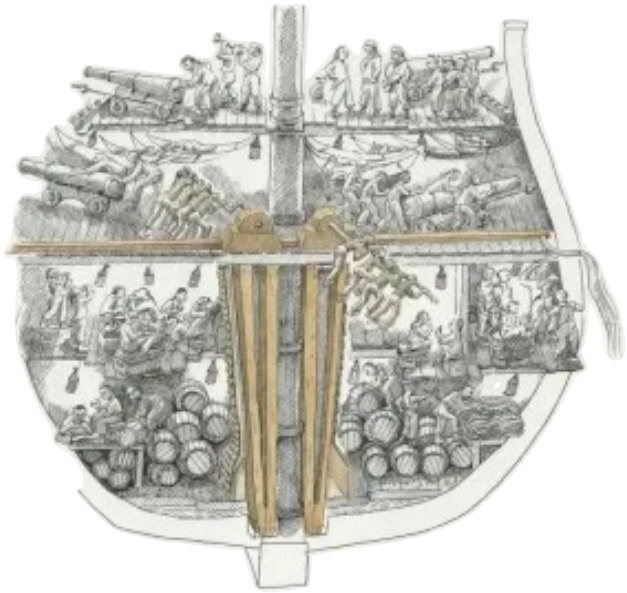
It was described in the auction catalogue as "made in 1327… somewhat rubbed and damp-stained". Harvard bought the manuscript for $27.50, which equates to about $450 based on today's inflation. The document had made its way from the Lowther family from Appleby, Cumbria, to the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in the 1780s. From Clarkson's estate it passed to the Maynard family and then to a London book seller who bought it at Sotheby's for £45.
Americans hold Magna Carta to be of particular significance to their country as it is considered the precursor to their own Declaration of Independence and as such, even a "copy" of the "Great Charter" was a welcome addition to the school's library. In time it was duly digitised and put online as HLS MS 172.

This brought it to the attention of Professor David Carpenter of King's College London who immediately thought that it looked like an original. He sought a second opinion from Professor Nicholas Vincent, a medieval expert at the University of East Anglia. The subsequent investigation used spectral and ultraviolet imaging which confirmed that the document at Harvard had been issued in 1300 by King Edward I. The "definitive version" of the Magna Carta was issued in 1225 and then reissued on several occasions. Professor Carpenter explains that Edward I's version was the "last time that a king of England actually confirmed the 1225 Magna Carta."

Dr. Paul Dryburgh, Principal Medieval Records Specialist at The National Archives in Britain, said: "This extraordinary discovery greatly enhances our knowledge of Magna Carta in the century after its first issue, showing it still has many exciting secrets to give up."
It is difficult to say how much HLS MS 172 is now worth. Professor Vincent said, "I would hesitate to suggest a figure, but the 1297 Magna Carta that sold at auction in New York in 2007 fetched $21.3m [£10.5m at the time], so we're talking about a very large sum of money."

ANOTHER FIND

New evidence from Historic England on the condition of the Protected Wreck Site of the Northumberland, a 17th century English warship, reveals that a remarkably large section of the warship may survive intact on the seabed. The survey, working with the Licensee of the Northumberland wreck, Dan Pascoe, who regularly dives it, and contractors MSDS Marine, showed that organic material such as wooden decks, wooden chests, (some including cannon balls and the ship's rope), have survived particularly well. This is due to being covered by sand and seabed sediments for hundreds of years. This well-preserved wreck site has the potential to tell us more about shipbuilding during the Stuart period more than 300 years ago.



The Northumberland (cross-section below) was a ship of the line Third Rate, which meant that she had between 64 to 80 guns, mounted on two decks. She was built by Francis Bayley of Bristol in 1679 as part of Samuel Pepys' regeneration of the English Navy. She saw service in the last great battle of the War of English Succession and the first battle of the War of Spanish Succession. All of her 220 crew were lost when she sank during the 'Great Storm' on 26 November 1703 on the treacherous Goodwin Sands off the Kent coast, along with three other warships. They were all part of Queen Anne's fleet, who was the last Stuart monarch, reigning from 1702 to 1714.

Shifting sands, strong currents and marine boring organisms continue to make this fragile Protected Wreck Site unstable. This puts the Northumberland at high risk of deterioration.

She currently lies over a large area of the seabed between 15-20 metres deep just south of her three sister ships, the Restoration, the Stirling Castle and the Mary, who were discovered in 1980. Northumberland's remains are covered by concretion or marine deposits, however more of the wreck is being exposed every day. Its condition is carefully monitored by Dan Pascoe as part of Historic England's ongoing field work, looking after 57 Protected Wreck Sites on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

OH NO HE DIDN'T[6]

Turn again, Whittington, thou worthy citizen,
Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London.
Make your fortune, find a good wife,
You will know happiness all through your life.
Turn again, Whittington, thou worthy citizen,
Turn again, Whittington, thrice Mayor of London.

Richard Whittington (c. 1354 – 1423) of the parish of St Michael, Paternoster Royal, City of London, was an English merchant and politician of the late medieval period. He is also the real-life inspiration for the English folk tale *Dick Whittington and His Cat*. He was four times Lord Mayor of London, a member of parliament and a Sheriff of London. In his lifetime he financed a number of public projects, such as drainage systems in poor areas of London, and a hospital ward for unmarried mothers. He bequeathed his fortune to form the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington which, over 600 years later, continues to assist people in need.
He was born into an ancient and wealthy family of Gloucestershire gentry, the third son of Sir William Whittington of Pauntley, in the Forest of Dean. As a younger son he would not expect to inherit his father's estate and thus was sent to the City of London to learn the trade of *mercer* (trader in textiles) through an apprenticeship.

Whittington became a successful merchant, dealing in valuable imports such as silks and velvets, much of which he sold to royalty and nobility from about 1388.

There is indirect evidence that he was also a major exporter to Europe of much sought-after English woollen cloth such as broadcloth. From 1392 to 1394, he sold goods to King Richard II worth £3,500 (equivalent to £3.9m in 2023). He also began moneylending in 1388, preferring this to outward shows of wealth such as buying property. By 1397, he was lending large sums of money to the crown. Whittington also had negotiated with the king a deal in which the City bought back its liberties for £10,000 (equivalent to £9,400,000 in 2023). He was formally elected as mayor by a grateful populace on 13 October 1397.

The famous legend of Dick Whittington and his cat has come down to us as a pantomime via an earlier incarnation as a puppet-play. It is thought that the medieval mind might have been unused to the concept of an entrepreneur and that the common people would have preferred a religious or magical explanation for his rise to fame. Early renderings of the story include a ballad and a chapbook (cheap, crudely made books, left). In the panto Dick's wife is Alice Fitzwarren, named after his actual wife. The untrue elements such as the cat and 'turning again' may reflect much earlier folk tales from as far away as Italy and Persia.

In the two portraits you can see how the *memento mori* of the skull has morphed into a cat to fit in with the legend.

1. Illustration taken from the opening page of "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale," from the Ellesmere manuscript of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, c. 1400. Wikimedia Commons.
2. Thanks to *Medieval Women* by Henrietta Leyser (Phoenix 1996). Beguinage photo courtesy of www.culturalwednesday.co.uk
3. Taken from *The Shortest History of Greece* by James Heneage (Old Street Publishing Ltd. 2021).
4. Courtesy of Tim Chadsey, furniture maker, Salisbury.
5. Courtesy of the National Archives with photo courtesy of Harvard Law School.
6. Thanks to Wikipedia and *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press 1995). Illustration New York, Edwd. Dunigan, 137 Fulton-street [ca. 1850] in the Public Domain. Portraits courtesy of Historic UK and Meisterdrucke.