

Cokewold: Chaucer's Meaning and Purpose

Geoffrey Chaucer, considered to be the greatest English poet from the Middle Ages, uses a London dialect of Middle English in his work. Through Chaucer's unique work in *The Canterbury Tales*, he presents to us a fabliau in *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*. A comedic tale that is bawdy, scatological and obscene, and that also contains crucial aspects of sex. Through this tale, Chaucer correlates and emphasizes the context of certain words based on the beliefs of society during his time period. Specifically, words involving the concept of sex and adultery. For example, in *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*, Chaucer uses the word "cokewold," referring to a man who is being cheated on by his wife. Despite the long history of the word, the wide range of definitions, and the many ways it's been written, it has a major focus on women being unfaithful to their husbands. This word then takes on a pivotal role in Chaucer's tale considering the fact that Alisoun is unfaithful to John. Through the use of "cokewold," Chaucer emphasizes the fear of John being cuckolded due to the evident age difference in his marriage. This word conveys his meaning through the demonstration of how being associated with such term, brought great shame and humiliation to men in the Middle Ages.

In *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*, Chaucer mentions the word "Cokewold," defined in the Middle English Compendium website as: "The husband of an unfaithful wife...an adulterous wife" (MEC). As presented in the Oxford English Dictionary, "cuckold," is derived from Old French and can be dated as early as the year 1250 in the anonymous poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Other synonyms as mentioned in the OED for the word "cuckold" include cuckolded, cukeweld, kukwold, and cokewalde. As stated in the etymology of the Oxford English Dictionary, in French, "The origin of the sense is supposed to be found in the cuckoo's habit of laying its eggs in another bird's nest" (OED). Here we see how the word "cuckold,"

despite its many ways to write it, was used in the Middle Ages as a way to depict the inferiority of women to men. For example, in another definition by the Middle English Compendium, “cokewold” is defined as, “The female of this bird is said to be unfaithful to its mate” (MEC). Through each of these definitions, we see how there is a deep focus on women cheating, but not on men. It is then evident that there is no equivalent term for a woman who is being cheated on by her husband. Instead, there is a lot of focus on women being unfaithful, women cheating, or adulterous women. Furthermore, the Middle English Compendium seems to take an unexpected turn in defining “cokewold” by defining it as, “(A) A term of abuse (B) as a surname” (MEC). When defined this way, the definition of “cokewold” takes an even deeper dive into the evident disparities that existed between women and men in the Middle Ages, and their views on each sex. Here we see how the word is defined as ‘*abuse*’, referring to the “abuse” of a man being humiliated when depicted as a “cuckold,” a disdainful surname and the greatest form of shame and embarrassment to men of the middle ages as a result of a cheating wife. Of course, cheating was frowned upon by society, however, men being unfaithful was nothing out of the ordinary, it was typical. On the other hand, if a woman cheated on her husband, it was considered a serious offense against their husband due to how men had a higher status in society. His wife’s vicious actions would reflect back on the man and negatively impact his status. Furthermore, the Oxford English Dictionary defines cuckold as: “A derisive name for the husband of an unfaithful wife” (OED) which only further emphasizes the great shame it brought to men who were referred to as a “cuckold,” by referring to the word as a ‘*ridicule*’ term.

Chaucer first mentions the word “cokewold” in *The Miller’s Prologue* when the Miller rudely intercedes the order of the tales and proceeds to tell his own tale about a cheating wife. We then see how Chaucer uses this word as a way to reiterate the shame of being cuckolded. The

Miller goes on to tell the Reeve, “And syde, “Leve brother Osewold / Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold / But I sey nat therefore that thou art onn” (Chaucer Lines 43-45) when the Miller exclaims “For I wol telle a lengende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf / How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cape” (Lines 33-35). The context of the story being about a carpenter getting cheated on by his wife quickly upsets the Reeve, who is also a carpenter, and he angrily protests. Through the Reeves’ protest against the tale, Chaucer accentuates how being cuckolded is a sensitive topic, especially to men. Furthermore, as the tale begins, we are only given a vague and brief description of John, the husband. We are told that he is a carpenter and that he is an old man who married a much younger girl. On the other hand, the description of Alisoun, the wife, is much longer and more detailed. The speaker emphasizes her youthfulness as a way to really accentuate her beauty, her passion for adventure, and her desire to let loose and be wild. This of course, can be the root of all problems in a marriage. The narrator goes on to say:

That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude
Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
For youthe and elde is often at debaat.
Buth sith that he was fallen in the snare,
He moste endure as oother folk his care. (Lines 120-124)

It is initially stated how a huge age difference in a marriage is doomed for disaster. Here the narrator is telling John that he should now endure all the troubles – i.e., being cuckolded – for marrying a much younger woman than himself. The narrator foreshadows all the troubles that are yet to come due to their major age difference. Additionally, it is clear how John lived with the constant fear of being cuckolded. The second and last time “cokewold” is mentioned is when the narrator talks about John’s jealousy. He says, “Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage / For

she was wylde and yong and he was old / And demed himself been lik a cokewold” (Lines 116-118). John loved Alisoun very much, but their age gap made him very jealous and controlling. Because she was young and beautiful, and he was old and boring, John knew he could be cuckolded by Alisoun. Even though Chaucer only uses ‘cokewold’ twice in the entirety of the tale, it is the key concept of the story. He uses this word as a way to reflect upon the moral that John should not have married such a young girl. The major differences between them deriving from their age difference led to Alisoun’s unfaithfulness. It is initially foreshadowed by the narrator that a marriage with such great age difference is doomed to fail. Alisoun was young and beautiful and had men, Nicholas and Absalon, lusting over her. Through the use of “cokewold,” Chaucer illustrates Alisoun’s deceiving actions and the embarrassment such actions of being cuckolded brought upon John. She shows no remorse whatsoever towards her injured husband after he is publicly humiliated and laughed at by the neighbors, while she goes unpunished.

The Middle Compendium and Oxford English Dictionary both define ‘cokewold’ or “cuckold,” as a woman being unfaithful to her husband i.e., a disdainful term used to describe a man who has been cheated on by his wife. Considering that women had no form of individuality, their actions were reflected in their husbands. Therefore, a cheating wife led to a man being called a “cokewold”, resulting in pure humiliation and disgrace for the husband. Through the use of “cokewold,” Chaucer is able to convey the severity of the meaning among society during his time. After being cuckolded by Alisoun and risking his life to save her from *‘the flood’*, John ends up with a broken arm and as the laughingstock of the neighborhood: “The folk gan laughen at his fantasye...And turned al his harm unto a jape...That he was holde wood in al the toun” (Chaucer 732-738). Not only is John depicted as insane by the entire community after explaining such an absurd story made up by Alisoun and Nicholas so they can have an affair, but he is now

an embarrassment after being cuckolded. This fabliau contains so much obscenity, sexual tension, and most importantly bawdiness. Absolon kisses Alisoun's buttocks, Nicholas gets severely burned on his behind by Absolon's hot metal rod, and John ends up with a broken arm and a ruined reputation. These punishments are a result of severe sexual desires; Alisoun and Nicholas's desire to have sex and fool John and Absolon's obsession with Alisoun. Alisoun cuckolding John not only shamed him but led to the disgrace of the other men involved too. Through this, we see how the Middle Ages severely condemned being promiscuous and sentenced those who were cuckolded to humiliation. By Chaucer using "cokewold," we see how through such a derogatory word he dismantles John's male power over Alisoun due how she goes unpunished whilst John's reputation is forever tainted.

Through the use of "cokewold," Chaucer is able to perfectly capture the negative attributions the word held in the Middle Ages. In this fabliau tale, Chaucer incorporates bawdiness and obscenity that further accentuates the shame the word brought upon men. As the Middle English Compendium associates the term as a form of "abuse" and degrading surname, we acknowledge how by depicting John as a man who is cuckolded by his wife, Chaucer accentuates how the term would bring great humiliation to any man who was characterized as such due to how John's reputation gets ruined. From the very beginning, Chaucer presents the fear John has of being associated as a cokewold due to how he was old and boring, and his wife was young, beautiful, and wild. The fear of being cuckolded drove John to be a jealous and controlling husband, only further inciting the desire for adventure from within his young wife. Chaucer then conveys the meaning of "cokewold" and its negative connotations by making John the laughingstock of the community and people seeing him as insane. Through this, he further

associates shame and humility when men are cuckolded due to how John suffers the most after being cuckolded while Alisoun goes unpunished.

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