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One of the important themes in “The Canterbury Tales” is “what is a good marriage?” A marriage, defined in the time “The Canterbury Tales” was written, is a sacred union of a man and woman. Since about a third of the Anglo-Saxon population was employed by the Church, the Anglo-Saxons knew well what a marriage was. A man was not complete without the love of a woman, and neither was a woman without a man; this idea had originated from the Bible and therefore all Anglo-Saxons knew the importance of finding a husband or wife. In “Astrophil and Stella,” the question most often asked is “how should I love?” Although Astrophil knows Stella is married and will never love him, he continues to yearn for her love. The main theme in both these works is love, and how love affects a person; this theme may also be present in “Riddle #75.”

During the time when “The Canterbury Tales” and “Astrophil and Stella” were written, there was a conflicting notion of love in the male world. Though men secretly yearned for women through courtly love, placing women in a status higher than themselves, men also battled with the idea that women were supposed to be of lower status than themselves. As a result, these same men often helped to suppress the female spirit in society. Women were placed on pedestals as objects of beauty and admiration, but they were never allowed to participate in the intellectual, political, and commercial worlds that comprised three of the many important areas of human life at that time. Women mostly remained at home to take care of their children while the men ran the rest of society. The fact that a female was excluded from the really important things in life likely caused her to feel unimportant and isolated from the world.

In “Riddle #75,” we find a woman sitting alone. There are two parts to this riddle, the woman and the person telling the riddle, and this combination of narrator and object helps to create the mystery present within this riddle. The reasons for a woman sitting alone are many, but the fact that such an ordinary occasion has been recognized and written down implies that this occasion must have some importance to the riddle’s author. Because the majority of Anglo-Saxon authors were male and because the primary reason for a male to notice a female in a male-dominated society was love, we can conclude that the writing of this riddle probably originated because the author was attracted to this woman. Among the many reasons the author could have been attracted to this woman is the fact that she is sitting alone and is not accompanied by a husband or other man; in a society where women were

dependent on men for their livelihood and were seldom found alone, the author likely noticed this woman because she was sitting alone. Being a man, this opportunity at courtship was probably significant enough to write down; perhaps the author questioned why this woman was sitting alone and this question spurred him to write a riddle about this occasion.

Now that we know a probable meaning of “Riddle #75,” we can see how it relates to meanings in “The Canterbury Tales” and “Astrophil and Stella.” Chaucer is greatly concerned about the relationship between men and women in marriage, and like the author of “Riddle #75” who is curious about why the woman he finds is not accompanied by a man, Chaucer is curious about the factors involved in creating a good marriage. In “The Knight’s Tale,” we find two knights stricken with love for a woman they cannot hope to have; Emily “sits alone,” on her pedestal of admiration and nobility, as the two knights battle for her love. Although one knight finally marries Emily in the end, the trouble he had to endure to win her was more than would be realistic for a good marriage. In “The Wife’s Tale,” the Wife feels how women have been given the lesser role in relationships and desires power; she declares that “marriage is a misery and a woe” and that the thing she most greatly desires is “sovereignty in marriage.” The fact that she has had five husbands attests to her inability to hold a good relationship with either one; this woman “sits alone” because she only seemingly, never sincerely, invites the company of males. This could be another reason why the woman in “Riddle #75” sits alone--perhaps her unattractiveness or undesirability made just as much of an impression on the author as if she had been beautiful.

In “Astrophil and Stella,” the fact that the woman is not sitting alone prompts the attention of the author. Astrophil (Sydney) knows that Stella (likely Penelope Devereaux) is married, and because of this, she is beyond his reach. Sitting alone in “Riddle #75” at least invited the possibility that this woman could be courted by the author; here, because Stella has already been taken by another man, the possibility of future courtship has been withdrawn. However, the withdrawing of this possibility only causes Astrophil to yearn more for Stella’s love, and we see this yearning in the last line of Sonnet 71-- “But ah, desire still cries, give me some food.”

There is much to wonder about ‘Riddle #75’--is it really a riddle about love as has been assumed here in this essay, or is it a riddle with other meanings? Most likely it is a riddle about love. There must have been many women around, but for the author of “Riddle #75” to notice this single woman implies a deeper feeling toward this woman than toward the others. The reason for this deeper feeling is unknown, but insight can be gained by looking at “The

Canterbury Tales” and “Astrophil and Stella,” two other poems about love. We see that men notice women for a variety of reasons--because men can more easily exert their power over women (“The Wife’s Tale”), because another man desires the love of the same woman (“The Knight’s Tale”), or because the fact that a woman is out of reach presents a challenge that a man feels he must overcome (“Astrophil and Stella”). Regardless the reason, we can be sure that the woman in “Riddle #75” will not remain alone for long; “desire still cries” in every man to be united with a woman in marriage.