

Professor Timothy Aubry

May 4, 2017

Feminist Expression in the “Wife of Bath Prologue and Tale”

The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” told by Alison in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, reveals the realities of the treatment of women in a patriarchal society. The speaker of the tale, Alison, brings forth a daring and rebellious attitude towards the strict gender roles of Chaucer’s society. During the 1500s, a woman was assumed no individuality and personal expression, regardless of social standing. Earlier feminist critics argue that Alison asserts authority over her life by using her sexual power to live out her desires and speaking unapologetically of her bold persona, making her a powerful feminist of her time. However, other feminist critics, most notably Elaine Tuttle Hansen, argue that the “Wife of Bath” does not exist; she is a creation of Chaucer, a male figure in a patriarchal society who keeps Alison in confinement, giving her only the intelligence and voice he wants to give to her for the purpose of an entertaining and provoking story. Because of the overwhelming evidence for both arguments, The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” remains extremely controversial on the topic of feminism, however the Wife’s boldness and Chaucer’s aim to raise awareness for the social issues of his time cannot be disputed.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, is a collection of tales told by pilgrims in the 15th century, where the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale is one of the longest stories. In the “General Prologue,” Chaucer describes the Wife of Bath in a highly explicit way, mentioning her clothes, physical features, her bold attitude and her scandalous past, which do not go well with the Christian norms regarding womanly behavior. Even though she is speaking to a predominately male audience, the Wife of Bath captures everyone’s attention. She is found to be

one of Chaucer's most interesting characters, considering she shamelessly recounts sexual fulfilment from her fifth marriage without any mentions of precreation:

Now my fifthe housbond wol I telle—
God lete his soule nevere come in helle!
And yet he was the moste shrewe.
.....
But in oure bed so fresh and gay,
And therwithal so wel coude he me glose (p.113)

The Wife's mentions of the purely sexual fulfilment she received from her fifth husband is condemned by the Christian tradition, however the wife does not believe God will punish nor does she have any intention of being the perfect woman. Although the term did not exist in Medieval times, the Wife mirrors the ideas of Radical-Libertarian feminism, violating sexual norms and the believing that women should control every aspect of their sexuality. She gains control of her husbands' property in exchange for sexual favors. Even though the Wife has to work within the limitations of the dominant patriarchy, she asserts her intelligence and strives to gain as much autonomy as possible. After the Wife of Bath's prologue comes the tale, where an ugly hag saves a Knight's life in return for marriage. The Knight has to keep his word and marry the hag, but he is undoubtedly saddened that he has to have an old and unattractive woman as a wife. The hag eventually becomes beautiful once she gets her own way. Scholars such as Susan Carter, have made the argument that the Wife's tale is centrally about liberation from gender role restriction.

Women in medieval society were defined by their relationship to a man or a group of men. In "Discourse and Dominion in Chaucer's Wife of Bath Prologue," Alexandra Losoniti states that women in Middle Ages were limited to being wives, widows, mothers, or nuns and

each taking a supportive, submissive and flat role (132). The Wife of Bath goes against this image even when she is referred to as a wife, rather than her first name. According to Alexandra Losoniti, it is evident that even when the Wife of Bath voices her attitude towards marriage and the role of women, she must do so in opposition to her society, “Even if she attempts a deconstruction of patriarchal literature in an experiential revision of it, the Wife can only define herself in relation to that authority...Patriarchal authority determines the fundamental bases for her self-definition” (133). Although this is seen when the Wife states:

Virginitie is indeed a great perfection,
And married continence, for God's dilection,
But Christ, who of perfection is the well,
.....
He spoke to those that would live perfectly,
And by your leave, my lords, that's not for me.
I will bestow the flower of life, the honey,
Upon the acts and fruit of matrimony. (261)

she is no less affirming her own authority by the act of speaking boldly about what she chooses for herself to a group of men. Women in medieval society were not categorized by economic, social or political functions, but by their social status as determined by their male relatives or their marital status. If a woman enjoyed a life of pleasure outside of marriage or prior to being married, a high degree of secrecy is expected, as implied in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. The Wife, does not follow this convention and does not apologize for the way she chooses to live her life despite the negative feedback her choices receive.

The Wife of Bath defies the stereotype of the submissive, flat, and properly chaste female celebrated in the male-dominated society of the 16th century. Alison speaks with confidence on the topic of marriage, flaunting her experience having married five times, “Experience, though

noon auctoritee/ Were in this world, is right ynough for me/ To speke of wo that is in marriage:” (Chaucer, 102). Alison dares to interpret the scripture in her own way, going against the generally accept ideas. She tackles the subject of having multiple husbands with boldness and with no regard for her gender: she compares herself to biblical figures, like King Solomon who had multiple marriages:

Lo, here the wyse king, daun Salomon;
I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
As wolde God it leveful were unto me
To be refreshed half so ofte as he!
.....
Of five husbandes scoleiyng am I.
Welcome the sixte, whan that ever he shall. (p. 103)

The Wife is not ashamed to admit she had multiple marriages and now possesses the experience that comes with it. By comparing herself to biblical kings who have also had multiple marriages, the Wife neglects the way the other pilgrims view women with similar situations. She doesn't view herself as a woman, but plays with the idea that she is equal to men and, sometimes, even superior.

The Wife possesses and speaks of power unlike any other woman of her time. Max Weber offers a straightforward definition of power: “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance...” (1978, 53). The Wife of Bath possesses power by this definition. She gets the flashy clothes and takes the trips she desires from her husbands despite the way in which her society tries to stop her. The fact that the Wife is able to make the pilgrimage without a male to accompany her shows her autonomy and power.

Other critics view *The Wife of Bath* as simply misogynistic, conforming to negative female stereotypes. Jankyn, the Wife's fifth husband who is a clerk, reads a "book of wikked wyves" (Chaucer 685) on a regular basis, which portrays women as "self-indulgent, lustful, treacherous, domineering, greedy, shrewish, prone to sin, and most importantly considered a danger to man's salvation..." (Wilson 198). The Wife dismisses this book because it was not created by women, but by misogynistic men. However, the Wife fits this mold perfectly. She boasts about using her sexuality to gain control of her husbands' money and property:

As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke
How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!
And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.
They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
.
But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plesse,
But it were for my profit and myn ese? (201-214)

With this interpretation, it is evident the Wife is going against most definitions of feminism, but it would be unfair to judge the Wife by the modern feminism theories since the limitations she faced in her society were unbreakable. Tony Slade further notes the Wife's illogicality imposed by Chaucer when the Wife claims to love her fifth husband most because he treats her badly, implying that women like to be disrespected: "I trowe I loved hym best, for that he/Was of his love doungerous to me" (Chaucer 513-14). The Wife is extremely submissive to her fifth husband, losing the control and power she possessed with her previous husbands. Instead of viewing her behavior with her fifth husband as a way for Chaucer to convey his misogynist

views, I propose to look at the Wife's old age as a barrier to her power. With her first four husbands, the Wife of Bath recognized her sexuality as a way to attain power and get what she desired as well as remain sexually fulfilled herself. However, with old age she realizes she can no longer possess the same desirability. Hence, she opts for a younger husband for sexual fulfillment, at the least. Since her fifth husband was a clerk, it is safe to assume that the Wife used the money she attained from her previous husbands for her dowry. The Wife of Bath was, without a doubt, confined by limitations of her patriarchal society, but she does not mindlessly follow the social norms. Rather, she strives to live a life that is not dull.

Feminist critics such as Susan Carter, Mary Carruthers, and Marshall Leicester argue that the Wife could not possibly be a feminist text, because Chaucer, a man part of the patriarchal society in which Alison lives, has complete control over her. Mary Carruthers further argues that Alison could not possibly be viewed as anything, being that any praise given to her is actually praise for Chaucer. The Wife of Bath has the power to escape Chaucer's pen and takes on a personality of her own. Chaucer's Alison is a creation of a Christian man, who often imposes limitations on what Alison says and does not say. In Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, the question of "What matter who's speaking?" is asked. Feminists such as Carter suggests it matters a great deal that the independent voice of the Wife is actually a man. Chaucer gives the Wife the amount of intelligence, inconsistency, humor, and sexuality he desires. Given this argument, is it possible for the Wife's character to break out of her creator's intentions? The Wife speaks of and compares herself to the norms of the Middle Ages in which she lived; her society cannot be ignored. Apart from the attitude assigned to her by Chaucer, feminist critics Susan and Gilbert suggest, "she has an invincible of her own autonomy, her own interiority...the authority of her own experience" (5). By creating the Wife as a bold character, Chaucer loses control of

attempting discredit her independence by having the Wife submit to her fifth husband. The Wife's independence is loud and still on top of mind of the reader. In "Playing in the Dark," Toni Morrison claims that Willa Cather's slaves in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, escape the limitations Cather has for them. The slave characters in her story are interesting to the reader and therefore jump out, despite the author's intentions to limit them. This argument goes for Chaucer's Alison just the same; even when Chaucer attempts to limit Alison's authority when she states, "And please don't be offended at my views;/ They're really only offered to amuse" (263). Even when the Wife says her views on marriage and power are only being told for entertainment, she continues on to tell her story so confidently and unapologetically that the reader cannot help but to take her seriously even when told not to. Rachel Ann Baumgardner in "I Alisoun, I Wife: Faucault's Three Egos and the Wife of Bath's Prologue" argues,

Alisoun learns how to use what Chaucer initially gives her until she is able to develop her own story, identity, tale, and conclusion. Her creator gives her a voice, but she is the one who uses it to her advantage. She is her own woman: one that is able to rise and stand to face feminist critics on her own. She will forever be a small piece of Geoffrey Chaucer, but she is eternally her own voice that cries out, "I am Alisoun. I am the Wife."

making the Wife independent even while being created by a man.

Joanna Shearer, author of "Naughty By Nature: Chaucer and the (Re) Invention of Female Good in Late Medieval Literature," states that Chaucer, as a person living in the fourteenth-century, would have no vocabulary to either comprehend or translate the term "feminist/feminism". Though this is true, Chaucer is ahead of his time in the recognition of the gender inequalities and playing with gender norms. Chaucer's awareness of social issues is apparent when the Wife tells her tale, where a knight rapes a woman and is therefore punished by death unless he finds the answer to the question of what all women want. This leads him to a hag

who reveals the answer: “A woman wants the sel-same sovereignty/ over her husband as over her lover,/ and master him; he must not be above her” (286). In turn, the hag demands marriage with the young knight and demands power over her own life and that of her husband. Only when she gains such power does she reward her husband by turning into a beautiful and dutiful wife. Ann S. Haskell rightly sees the Wife “expressing Chaucer’s own social beliefs...Chaucer is able to raise the issues of rape, class superiority, physical beauty, masculine superiority and constriction of choice, all in order to question older social values and to propose contemporary ideas which are more appreciative of women and their rights.” By having the Wife tell this tale, he shows that the Wife is not only able to speak about her experience, but to also tell a tale like the other pilgrims. Her prologue serves as the Wife’s insistence on asserting her right to speak, rather than simply telling a tale. In *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Susan argues the end of the Wife’s tale returns the reader to the conventional and misogynistic world of Chaucer, stating, “But the ending of the tale, like the ending of so much Chaucerian fiction in this regard, safely returns us to a more familiar plot and a more suitable alignment of the sexes. The rapist not only saves his life but is also rewarded by the promise of that impossible being, an unfailingly beautiful, faithful, and obedient wife; the hag who gave him the answer, who had all the power, gives it up, and transforms herself into a Constance or Griselda.” Griselda, seems like a flat the perfect example of how a woman should be; she remains patient and kind even after her husband Walter inflicts the cruel tests of taking her children away and divorcing her. However, under a closer look, Griselda’s power and strength lies within her patient and in the end she gets her children and her husband back. Because of this, I disagree with Susan that the hag gives up her power, rather she chooses to reward her husband for giving in to her wishes. The hag may not be a radical feminist on a quest to change the way society views women, but she attains what she

wants and then opts to reward her husband with her beauty. It is important to note that the hag chooses how she wants to appear:

‘And have I won the mastery?’ said she,
‘Since I’m to choose and rule as I think fit?’
‘Certainly, wife,’ he answered her, ‘that’s it.’
‘Kiss me,’ she cried. ‘No quarrels! On my oath
And word of honour, you shall find me both, (291)

This transition makes it possible for her to turn from a woman who was wicked, according to the medieval society of her time, to a type of wife who was found desirable by that same society.

Despite the diverging views of the feminist criticism surrounding the Wife of Bath, the value of the *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and Prologue cannot be disputed. Critics such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar see the Wife as a radical feminism who is able to obtain control of her life in various ways not seen by other women of her time. The Wife’s confidence is admirable and her use of humor on the subject of marriage is a genius way to cater to her audience. She takes up more time than any other pilgrim speaking and does not question her power. She knows the pilgrims are interested in what she has to say because she has experience which is her “auctoritee.” Given the fact that women of the Medieval Age were little more than a possession and were certainly expected to be sensitive, quiet and unpassionate, the Wife’s views come as a shock to the pilgrims, forcing them to at the very least think about the social issues she is putting forth. Some earlier critics view the Wife of Bath’s use of her sexuality as anti-feminist, catering to the needs and wants of her husbands. However, it is precisely the way in which she uses her sexuality for her own gain and enjoyment that make her a radical feminist by the definition provided above. Chaucer intentionally used Alison’s character to present his personal feminist

ideals to his audience, while sometimes limiting her, Chaucer intended for the Wife to be a strong character who took the life of her own.

Works Cited

- Carter, Susan. "Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale." *Chaucer Review* 37 (2003): 329-45
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." *Canterbury Tales*. The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. 8th ed. New York: Norton, 2006. 226-234.
- Baumgardner, Rachel Ann. "I Alisoun, I Wife: Foucault's Three Egos and the Wife of Bath's Prologue." N.p., 15 Jan. 2006. Web. 31 Oct. 2015
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. 1615-36.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984.
- Losonti, Alexandra. "Discourse and Dominion in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Prologue." *Journal for Communication and Culture*. N.p., Winter 2011. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.
- Morrison, Toni. "Playing in the Dark." Harvard University Press. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 May 2017.
- Smith, Tiffany. "The Matriarch of Bath – Chaucer's Feminist Insights." *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2017.
- Weber, Max, 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.