

## The Wife of Bath: a Tragic Caricature of Women

Alisoun of Bath has long been considered one of Chaucer's most memorable characters, both for her candid vivacity and her modern stance on women's place in patriarchal society. She has often been hailed a true feminist figure because of her railings against the portrayals of the "wikked wyves" (Chaucer 685) created by the male authors of clerkly literature and her spoken dedication to the concept of female "sovereynetee" (1038). However, it is impossible not to detect the inconsistencies between what she avows and how she actually behaves. What then is Chaucer actually saying about the women of his time; is he really a forward minded feminist as he is often described? David Reid explores this possible misconception of Chaucer's sexual politics and the Wife's representation of them:

In common sense human terms [the Wife] is absurd and grotesque, a figment of that anti-feminist gallimaufry, the Prologue to her Tale. That many take her as a triumph of Chaucer's mellow and humane art tells us more about the place of women in our tradition than about the words before us...It seems much more likely that they have found a way of misunderstanding Chaucer...It has made her an embarrassment, so that, fearing for Chaucer's good name, we misunderstand her elaborately. (73)

Following this interpretation, through the Wife's Prologue and Tale, she at once dismisses and embodies the misogynistic medieval stereotype, while also adhering to the suppressive ideals of the patriarchal power continuum she verbally abandons.

Female characters in medieval literature, which was predominantly produced by male clerks, were often molded into the stereotypical monstrous woman: "self-indulgent, lustful,

treacherous, domineering, greedy, shrewish, prone to sin, and, most importantly considered a danger to man's salvation..." (Wilson 198). Jankyn, her fifth husband and notably a clerk, possesses a "book of wikked wyves" (Chaucer 685), which contains stories of the villainy of these stereotypes, which the Wife dismisses on the basis that they were not created by women, but rather misogynistic men. Ironically, Alisoun fits this mold perfectly. After all, as Elaine Hansen notes, she is "a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the masculine imagination against which she ineffectively and only superficially rebels" (35). The Wife is characterized by a preoccupation with sex, which she uses to manipulate her husbands, of which she has had five, into acquiescing their land and money to her control. Alisoun boasts of this exploitation when she states:

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 plese,  
 But it were for my profit and myn ese? (201-214)

This passage displays the Wife as a perfect example of the "traditional figure of the wanton woman" (Justman 345), in that she is selfish, licentious, greedy, and dangerous to men. The Wife is utterly shameless, as well as illogical: two characteristics that were established as natural inclinations of women at the time (348-49).

This perverse rationalization is epitomized by the hag in her Tale's nonsensical prioritization of the Knight's three objections to his new bride. The Knight objects to the hag's ugliness, agedness, and low social class. While it would seem as if the first two complaints were of larger importance, the hag illogically delivers a speech of over a hundred lines on the subject of true "gentillesse" (Chaucer 1109). As Tony Slade notes, "...Chaucer is aware of the illogicality of the argument whilst the Wife herself is perfectly serious in repeating ideas which have become, by the time she is telling them, commonplaces of Christian and other literature" (245-46).

In her personal life the Wife demonstrates this trait of illogicality often attributed to women when she contradicts her initial boast of being blessed with "experience" (Chaucer 1) by lamenting, "But age, allas! That al wole envenyme,/ Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith/...The flour is goon..." (Chaucer 474-77). One cannot have both youth and experience, as the hag in her Tale is forced to recognize and delineate. Since it can be assumed that the Wife imbued her Tale with her own values, that the hag chooses to be young and beautiful speaks of the Wife's distorted priorities, which deviate considerably from her initial assertion.

Her irrationality is also evident when she states that she loved Jankyn best because he was the worst to her, "I trowe I loved hym best, for that he/ Was of his love daungerous to me" (Chaucer 513-14). For as she acknowledges, women want what they can't have (such as Janykn's devotion) and care not for that which is easily attainable (such as her first three husbands' love).

This is also demonstrated in her desire for "sovereynetee" (1038) in her marriages, which she bizarrely abandons in her fifth marriage once she reestablishes financial control. As David

Parker notes, “Her professed beliefs in female sovereignty in marriage...are not finally followed by the heroine of her tale, who obeys her husband...And her own claim to having exercised ‘maistrie’ over her fifth husband is to be doubted...” (94). This is illustrated when she speaks of the egalitarian nature of their relationship:

After that day we hadden never debaat.  
 God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde  
 As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,  
 And also trewe, and so was he to me. (Chaucer 822-25)

The hag in her Tale also abandons her proclamation that what “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie hym above” (1038-40). After he allows her to choose if she would like to be either old and faithful or young and beautiful and the recipe “happy ending” is secured, she submits to his will and “relinquishes her power and dissolves into literal silence and alleged submission, the archetypal feminine transformation” (Hansen 33). The Wife verifies this when she says, “And she obeyed hym in every thing/ That myghte doon hym plesance or liking” (Chaucer 1255-56). This denouement shows that though the Wife calls for female empowerment in theory, she does not believe in or prescribe to it in practice.

These conundrums demonstrate how the Wife both consciously and unconsciously endorses the misogynistic role she is fighting against as a whole (Hansen 32), which only furthers the sense of foolishness surrounding the Wife’s Prologue and Tale. Similar to how she uses male authored texts to justify herself and her “feminist” views, the Wife accepts and even

propagates the patriarchal system, though she means to denounce it. Her delusions about her own life are “exploded by her own accidental self-revelations in the contradictions between statements she makes about her past” (Parker 97). As Parker notes, the Wife of Bath is “a character not in harmony but in conflict with itself” (98). Therefore, one must ask what did Chaucer intend to say about the nature of women? He created a typical stereotypical woman who is too foolish to even realize she exemplifies what she at once condemns and who propagates the primitive notions of male superiority which she is combating. I think it is safe to say we must dispel “the bipartite myth of Chaucer’s special sympathy or empathy with women and his aesthetic or moral transcendence” (Hansen 36). Perhaps, rather than “fearing for Chaucer’s good name” (Reid 73), we should instead fear for the good name of women, which is so often under attack.

## Works Cited

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