

Presentation of women as literary Characters by Chaucer

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Abstract: This paper analyzes and compares female narrators in Canterbury tales to women's status in England in the fourteenth century and aims to demonstrate that the female narrators and characters are representatives of women in that society, which was patriarchal and misogynist. The essay also contrasts women's characteristics and attributes to the male narrator's, in the Canterbury Tales, perspectives on women found in their prologues and tales, analyzing what the text reveals regarding the male narrators opinions or preferences as to admirable and desirable characteristics in women. It aims to provide answers to the following fundamental questions: how are the female narrators and characters represented? Does their status correspond to women's historical situation in the fourteenth century? Are the female narrators given their own subjectivity or are they merely the voices of the dominant order? Do the female narrators and characters rebel against the patriarchal order or do they accept their inferior role to men? In order to answer these questions women's status in the fourteenth century as seen through historical sources will be looked at; their legal status, prevailing ideas about their inherent qualities, the influence of the clergy, biblical and religious views on gender, and restrictions women faced in society. This paper will also demonstrate that in order to be considered a good wife a woman needed to be humble and obedient and to accept her fate as being subject to male authority figure without resistance. However even if these „good“ wives were obedient comments are found in the Canterbury Tales indicating that they are in no position to gain control over their lives; which are wholly circumscribed by their body. It also demonstrates that if a woman dared to defy or revolt against the norm in medieval society and obtain power over her own fate she was considered wicked and immoral.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the minds of some, there is nothing more dangerous than a woman who stands tall, speaks her mind, and possesses a firm notion of what she wants from herself, her peers, and the world. Such a woman has been portrayed in countless forms of media throughout the development of Western culture. As feminism slowly began to take root all over 1850s Europe, appealing to rich and poor alike, this type of woman shifted from being looked down upon and feared to being a beacon of inspiration. However, before this shift occurred, there was a pervasive, implicit societal code integrated into the very backbone Medieval Europe. Women were expected to fit themselves into one, ubiquitous mold: a small, unassuming, shadow of a figure who obeyed her husband's every whim, whose loyalty to her family and her house, no matter how abhorrent, was only eclipsed by her idealization of God, who was expected to keep her mouth shut and her head down. She was only seen as a possession. This ideology was common among men of all classes during the Middle Ages, and thus, many of these tenets are addressed in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. Likewise, is important to understand the circumstances under which The Canterbury Tales were written. This set of poems was penned in the midst of extreme social upheaval, as Europe was undergoing a change from the religious-based Medieval Ideology to the more secular Renaissance Humanism. Chaucer and his peers continually grappled which this mass change in belief systems, and new social trends undoubtedly led to him writing this anthology. He intended to preserve a snippet of time which would eventually be lost forever to new social mores. It is impossible to say exactly how Chaucer dealt with such changes, however, one can infer that he was less than thrilled with them. After all, his characters represent a sea of contradictions, contradictions that parallel the current societal fight. For example, one of the characters, The Monk, who constantly violates the unwritten social and theological code of what a man of God should be. Instead of being caring, stuck in purposefully planned poverty, and selfless, The Monk is greedy and lives a somewhat sumptuous: the antithesis of the ideal monk.

And now, with that in mind, consider this. The Canterbury Tales, which describes the pilgrimage of a motley group of people, is published in 1495. One of the characters breaks out of the constraints placed upon her and is the antithesis of every Medieval woman. She takes no issue with standing up to her husband and

castigating him for his constant belittlement of her. She is incredibly promiscuous: she has had five husbands and is considering getting a sixth. When asked to justify this, she asserts that “the wyse king, dan Salomon;/I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon;/As, wolde god, it leveful were to me/To be refresshed half so ofte as he!” (Chaucer 35-38), immediately revealing not only a deep reverence of The Bible, but a sharp intellect, as she was able to interpret the story of King Solomon to fit her own personal life. Her entire personality, her entire life, goes against the most basic tenets of Middle English society. Should a character as this not be lauded? Should women strive to be like her in every way? Readers have continually answered yes, but in doing so, they undermine Chaucer’s original vision. The aforementioned character is The Wife of Bath, and she is often lauded by readers, academics, and activists for being the first truly feminist character in European literature. However, she is not meant to be a hero, an aspiration for women everywhere. On the contrary, Geoffrey Chaucer created The Wife of Bath in order to emphasize that women ought to play the parts that society instructed them to perform.

Chaucer’s text was never intended to be interpreted in a feminist manner. In fact, some scholars argue that Chaucer actually consulted “anti-feminist literature” prior to writing *The Canterbury Tales* (Huppé 378). He was not focused on writing a feminist discourse or furthering the social and intellectual progress of women. *The Canterbury Tales* was a social commentary on the overall grand, sweeping change taking place throughout Europe. While women may have enjoyed slight social progress, it is unlikely that Chaucer supported it or even cared. If he were a true supporter of the advancement of rudimentary feminism, the other prominent female character, The Prioress, would have been going against the status quo of what was acceptable for Medieval women. However, she is very much the epitome of what the ideal woman was said to be: she is “She was so charitable and so pitous/ She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous/ Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.” (Chaucer 144-146). As a meek, pious woman with a thirst for material goods, The Prioress would have been praised and perhaps even coveted, had she not been a nun. Though she is used to convey a social message, it is not about the development of women’s rights. Thus, if Chaucer’s true intention was for *The Canterbury Tales* to show pervasive support for women, The Prioress would have appeared to clash with the societal tenets dictating what women should be and act, just like The Wife of Bath.

Due to the fact that Chaucer’s work was intended to comment on the flawed social development and the destruction of his coveted ideals for European society, it is simply foolish to assume that The Wife of Bath is meant to be a feminist figure. In fact, the very structure of how her character is presented confirms this notion. The Wife of Bath is considered the comic relief of *The Canterbury Tales*, “a stock figure in a varied sort of pantomime”(Reid 74). This is a fairly accurate statement: besides her “feminism”, The Wife of Bath is also known for her sarcastic and witty humor. However, unlike the stock characters of old, she is multi-faceted. She is funny, yes, but also shrewd, cunning, and obstinate. This character trope, according to David S. Reid, is the “archewyf” (Reid 76). Such a woman often appears to possess some type of positive personality trait which is used to divert the reader from her true malicious nature hidden within. In the Wife’s case, her humor, her wit, and her intelligence is a ploy to hide her secret devious nature.

Likewise, The Wife of Bath stands out and is clearly used as a mechanism to degrade women in this classic work of medieval literature due to her blasphemous nature. Christianity was at its peak during the Middle Ages. This was a time of indulgences, of great sociopolitical power unequivocally placed in the hands of the Church, of Europeans dedicating their lives to becoming the perfectly pious and God-fearing individual. Thus, a character such as The Wife of Bath would have immediately stood out to the kind of people that the theocentric population of Medieval Europe cultivated. After all, she violates every aspect of medieval society. People in the Middle Ages were taught to act based on what would be beneficial for the greatest amount of people. Personal pleasure and self-satisfaction were looked down upon, and hobbies were unheard of: if people had spare time, it was dedicated to the church or working at home. However, The Wife of Bath rejects this notion. She is a frequent adventurer, and has traveled “...thries...at Jerusalem/She hadde passed many a straunge strem/At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne/In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne” (Chaucer 465-467). Likewise, medieval ideology dictated that predestination was God’s supreme law: it was decided far in advance whether or not an individual would ascend to heaven or be damned to hell. And yet, The Wife of Bath is not one to wait for fate to take its course

II. WOMEN AS NARRATOR

Chaucer, in his female pilgrimage thought of women as having an evil-like quality that they always tempt and take from men. They were depicted as untrustworthy, selfish and vain and often like caricatures not like real people at all. Through the faults of both men and women, Chaucer showed what is right and wrong and how one should live. Under the surface, however, lies a jaded look of women in the form that in his writings he seems to create them as caricatures and show how they cause the downfall of men by sometimes appealing to their desires and other times their fears. Chaucer obviously had very opinionated views of the manners and behaviours of women and expressed it strongly in *The Canterbury Tales*. In his collection of tales, he portrayed

two extremes in his prospect of women. The Wife of Bath represented the extravagant and lusty woman where as the Prioress represented the admirable and devoted followers of church. Chaucer delineated the two characters contrastingly in their appearances, general manners, education and most evidently in their behaviour towards men.

The Wife of Bath represents the "liberal" extreme in regards to female stereotypes of the Middle Ages. Unlike most women being anonymous during the Middle Ages, she has a mind of her own and voices herself. Furthermore, she thinks extremely highly of herself and enjoys showing off her Sunday clothes whenever the opportunity arises. She intimidates men and women alike due to the power she possesses. Because of her obnoxious attitude Chaucer makes her toothless, fat and large. Doubtlessly, she is very ugly, almost to the point of "not-presentable. This to me shows how Chaucer depicts what men don't want. The Prioress, on the other hand, serves as a foil to the Wife of Bath. Chaucer describes her as "tender-hearted" who cannot bear the sight of pain or physical suffering. She will cry at the thought of a dog dying. It could represent that she has a frail soul with low tolerance for pain and suffering. The latter description carries over into the modern stereotypes about women as skittish and afraid members of society who need to be cared for. Chaucer paints a very delicate and elegant picture of the Prioress. Her manners of eating are far from the brutish festivals of the time. Chaucer describes her table manners as very graceful, not a drop of anything would fall from her mouth, and she was very polite when taking thing at the table. (Lines 131-4). Chaucer's last description of Prioress - the letter "A" around her neck that stood for "Amor vincit omnia" meaning "Love conquers all." The brooch symbolizes love with which her rosaries are adorned is a common accessory for religious devotion, which carries the courtly love anthem: love conquers all. The symbol that she wears shows that she is perfect and obviously a representation of what most men of the time want but of course they can't have her. Accordingly, the Wife of Bath is daunting, ostentatious and ultimately ugly. She is nothing in comparison to the Prioress who is elegant, well mannered and above all loving.

The Prioress's superiority over the Wife of Bath is shown again in the presence of education. The Wife of Bath has travelled a great deal and seems knowledgeable about things of the world. She brings up many a valid point throughout the prologue but Chaucer voids her opinion because of her social class and looks when in truth she is actually wise. The Wife of Bath has understanding for the world and knows very well what's going on. However, during the Middle Ages, only scholarly or academic knowledge is recognized. What the Wife of Bath understands and pursues may not be commendable. On the contrary, the Prioress is considered "scholastic" and high class due to her good manners. Her ability to speak the noble language of French puts her character in a higher class as well. Thus, once again the Prioress is considered intelligent. Basically, the Wife of Bath is kind of a foil to the women during the Middle Ages. Her actions and thinking not only differ from the Prioress but from everyone The Wife of Bath is radical especially when it comes to relationship with men. She is characterized as knowing much about love, which is illustrated by her physical defect-being gap-toothed symbolizing "sexual accomplishment." The Wife of Bath cannot resist telling her companions about all of her sexual experiences. She also had five husbands and countless affairs, thus breaking innocent men's hearts. Her husbands fell into two categories. The first categories of husbands were rich but also old and unable to fulfil her "sexual" demands. The other husbands were sexually vigorous, but harder to control. None of her five marriages were successful because the Wife of Bath was constantly seeking to have power and control over them, Chaucer I think characterises the Wife of Bath in this way to show men's fears. For instance, her fifth but not the last (it was said that she is on her way of marrying the sixth before she told her tale) marriage was unhappy because her husband who is half of her age beats her. To anger him, she tore three pages from his book. After this he beats her again. She pretended to be dead and he felt so guilty that he threw his whole book in the fire. This gave her the upper hand for the rest of her life. This contrast between the Wife of Bath and the Prioress describes fully the difference between what men do and do not want in a woman. First, the violent and deceitful act of tearing books then the deceitful act of lying to her husband will never be done by the Prioress as the Prioress is well mannered, educated, "powerful" and above all, is loving. Second, is the issue of marriage and "sexual demand" which will never have its roots in the Prioress's life as she has taken the vow of chastity. This being the case appeals to both fear and desire, as all men would desire the Prioress, but fear they could not have her. The Prioress is pure in heart and thinks of men and women alike. It's interesting how the Wife of Bath was always striving to have sovereignty and the Prioress was granted sovereignty even though she didn't seek for it intentionally. The Wife of Bath and the Prioress alike have power over men once again this characterisation would scare men. It is rare that women are given such high stature during the medieval period. The Prioress as her name suggests is "a superior being in a monastic community for women" is so important that three priests were in her company; as this shows her status as the boss, this dominance would be very fearful for men of the time. The hag, whom the Wife of Bath identifies with, initially was granted sovereignty and power over man.

As mentioned above, the Wife of Bath desires what most women want and that is power over men, her being described as being ugly and wanting power to probably exploit that power as she did with husband number five definitely shows a representation of what men don't want. Early in the tale, there is a quotation said

by the Wife of Bath supporting this idea. "I don't deny that I will have my husbands both my debtor and my slave, and as long as I am his wife he shall suffer in the flesh. I will have command over his body during all his life, not he." In other words, she is saying that she will have total control over herself, her husband, and their household and very specifically, not just the husband. However, there are also situations where she seems to submit to her husband. "Nevertheless, since I know your pleasure I will satisfy your physical pleasure." This was said by the Wife of Bath and supports the non-feministic view. It is considered non-feministic because the woman is giving in to the man's desire, which goes against feministic beliefs. The Wife of Bath has a choice of not giving in to the man, but she decides to let the man have pleasure for his desire not hers, because from her past experience she knew how much men enjoy it when women are submissive. This quotation obviously goes against feministic beliefs, leaving an unanswered contradiction about the Wife of Bath. However, Chaucer does show through this characterisation that the Wife of Bath is desirable in one way to men because she is willing to be submissive to their desires. This raises an unseen question of desire for her as I think most men of the time would desire a woman who would grant this. The character of the Prioress in the same light, certainly keeps one guessing. Is her tale the product of the simple mind, or of one poisoned by anti-Semitism? The Prioress is, well mannered, educated, powerful, and loving. Ironically, her prologue and tale contain strong elements of anti-Semitism. This is shown through her use of the Jew as the villain of her tale. However, there is no historical evidence of ritual murder of Christian children by Jews, but that would not have mattered to the pilgrims. Anti-Semitism, directed at a people thought to have both rejected and murdered Christ, was distressingly deep-seated. This bigotry unfortunately was rampant at the time, and both the sentiments and their being expressed in the context of a religious story would not have seemed strange to Chaucer's pilgrimage. Nevertheless, on a less depressing note, her tale can tell us something of the medieval attitude towards simple piety and miracles, which also was quite prevalent. I don't think it is about the Jews because; they were expelled from England in 1290. Yet, whether this tale is the product of the simple mind or anti-Semitism still remains an enigma. This story also reinforces her devotion to the church and this characterisation can be seen as a fear to some men as they are unable to obtain her. It is here we see the only time when the Wife of Bath and the Prioress relate to each other. In this we can see that Chaucer is telling us that the Prioress is not as perfect as she might of first seemed, and in this way we can see that both women have their own potential.

The Wife of Bath seems to be feministic yet there are also some situations in which she does as the men wish. The Prioress on the other hand keeps you wondering and seems to be a perfect lady however she is unobtainable and probably to well educated and out of reach for most men. Chaucer portrays the tale of Wife of Bath as hypocritical but between the lines there is some helpful advice for many women in the world today. In this way Chaucer is trying to educate women through her tale, and say that there are times one should be a feminist and times one should not. This characterisation of her strong head would have scared the men of the time. In his contrast with the two he shows in both women what men fear. In the Wife of Bath it's that men don't want to be controlled and in the Prioress it's the fact that she is unobtainable and maybe too clever for everyday man. These representations however when put together, create a women that seems to be perfect for what most men want and desire.

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