

## Chaucer's Most Nimble Feat:

### Reproof of Anti-feminist Theology in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*

Written by Stephanie C. Merryfield

Edited by Jessica Grove

#### Abstract:

*The Wife of Bath* and its *Prologue* is inarguably one of the most controversial of Geoffrey Chaucer's corpus of literature. Its timelessness lends the work to the most pressing of contemporary arguments—woman's place and her agency. While many literary critics argue that Chaucer is in support of the anti-feminist theology propagated by many medieval theologians, this literary analysis refutes those ideas, and instead, asserts that while Chaucer brings to bear the most prevalent accusations made against women, he does so in keeping with dialectical argumentation. This method of voicing oppositional arguments was widely practiced by St. Thomas Aquinas and others persuaded by Scholasticism. In other words, Chaucer proposes a position, and then undermines it with counter-logic.



Throughout recorded history, social change has been wrought only through opposition to the existing power structure and its leaders. The medieval period is no exception. The Church, during the Middle Ages, was responsible for generating anti-feminist theology, which perpetuated the subjugation of woman. Geoffrey Chaucer, in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, marshals Scholasticism to interrogate these accusations by clerics. Undoubtedly, many

contemporary scholars have pondered the puzzling “generic gymnastics”<sup>\*</sup> in the work; I propose that Chaucer constructs a dialectical argument wherein he not only presents both sides within the poem, but also engages in prescient oppositional advocacy as a means of social change. Daringly, he directs the message at officials of the Church by using their most honored means of discovery — Scholasticism. In his work, *The Worlds of Medieval Europe*, Clifford R. Backman explains, “Although the scholastics ... never devised a comprehensive syllabus or platform, they generally agreed ... about the nature of truth: that it was to be found through Argument ... recognized Authority, and that it was Additive” (Backman 306). While all three concepts, argument, authority, and additive, are evident within the text, for the purpose of this theoretical criticism, I will focus on argument and authority. Further, by briefly examining the historical context of Chaucer's writings, and by noting both anti-feminist dogma and rhetorical stratagem, we will better understand the long lasting significance of *The Wife of Bath's Tale Prologue* as a forerunner of pro-feminist literature.

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\* Generic gymnastics: term used to explain the discernible toggling between one literary genre and another within the same text or work — coined by Robert J. Meyer-Lee, Ph.D.

*The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and her *Tale* garner a considerable mass of attention from both literary critics and feminist scholars. Unlike lesser-known works penned during his era, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and, more specifically, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, maintain a saliency which is, in part, attributable to its inherent timelessness. Curiously, it is both the delight and bane among feminist scholars; some ascribe to it a pronounced sensitivity to the plight of woman, while others scorn the work, branding it an exemplum of anti-feminist propaganda. The protagonist, Alisoun, weaves a story for her audience chronicling her life with her five husbands. She withholds nothing from their aural voyeurism and spares no saucy detail. Unabashedly, she tells of her carnal knowledge of husbands while simultaneously defying anti-feminist theology of the day. To many scholars, this evidences the lowly nature grounded in "solas," or earthly pleasures, and thus confirms the arguments of anti-feminists. Conversely, other scholars indicate that her capacity to assert herself and thereby maintain control of wealth, albeit through cunning, affirms self-actualization. Interestingly, the two schools of thought, respectively, choose to either reject the authority of scripture or to suggest that Paul and Church fathers were antagonistic to both women and marriage. Still, the nimbleness with which she sets forth an argument, then reproves that argument with a more significant argument based on scriptural authority is widely untreated by the two aforementioned theoretical camps. Nor can it be addressed by genre, as we will explore at greater length. However, what is noteworthy in recounting her life is obvious disapprobation for anti-feminism that emerges as she sets forth argument after argument, both questioning and responding to the accusations of androcentric clerics.

Anti-feminist theology of the medieval period asserted "that the rational, intellectual, spiritual, and therefore, higher side of human nature predominated in men, whereas the irrational, material, earthly, and, therefore, lower side of human nature predominated in women ..." (Norton Anthology of English Literature 256). This explanation is significant in that during the telling of her story, Alisoun responds (at times, tacitly, and at others, overtly) to this over-arching presumption of female corporeality. Herein, we can see the frailty of the suggestion that the genre of the *Wife* is a "fictional autobiography, a confession, a mock sermon ... or an apologia ..." (Sanders). As I noted previously, scholars have attempted to reconcile the multifarious elements in the text to a particular genre, an amalgamation of disparate genres, or an iteration of genres. While fixing a genre upon the work could prove slightly beneficial for understanding the work, the slipperiness keeps many theorists undecided. Further, these labels tend to obfuscate the nuanced tension between Alisoun and the anti-feminists. Demonstrably, "The Frere lough whan he hadde herd all this ..." (NAEL line 835). Here, the representative of the Church attempts to dismiss her just before she begins her tale. The friar's laughter in response to her prologue is a rudimentary allegorical representation. Unarguably, to concede that Alisoun is making a confession, as some have purported, is to altogether ignore her refutation of clerical dogmatism. It is doubtful that the work is a confession when we look unflinchingly at the adeptness with which Alisoun's engages her opponents with the scripture. This is inherent to Scholasticism and to dialectical argumentation.

Dialectical argumentation, a concept delineated by Scholasticism, has its origins in Socratic, Aristotelian, and Ciceronian precepts of oratory and rhetoric. The Catholic Encyclopedia explains, "[i]n Greek philosophy the word originally signified 'investigation by dialogue,' instruction by question and answer, as in the heuristic method of Socrates and the dialogues of Plato" (Coffey). It is important to note that while the era was encompassed by Scholasticism within the Middle Ages, the schoolmen and clerics, in their attention to argumentation as a means of discovering truth, were practicing dialectical argumentation (Backman 306). Chaucer, both as an adherent to the Church and a learned man, was knowledgeable of this rhetorical strategy. It was the means by which theologians advanced their knowledge of God. They formulated exhaustive and complicated questions and then proceeded to answer them and refute and yet build upon them.

Chaucer constructs a dialectical argument wherein he pits both proponents and detractors against one another within the poem, as illustrated by the encounter between Alisoun and the friar. He does so as a means of gaining entrance into the anti-feminist theological discourse. What adds to the success of Chaucer in portraying Woman as valued and knowledgeable is his humorous approach to the debate that ensues. Chaucer's placement of Alisoun's first argument is strategic: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynough enough for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (NAEL lines 1-3). Here, Chaucer permits his protagonist to readily oppose the prominent theologians who tout the absolute authority of the bible but misappropriate the scriptures to support their socio-political leanings. When Alisoun immediately takes up the argument about "auctoritee" (authority), she is speaking to the powers that be. She begins her assailing swiftly. She continues, "But me was told, certain nat longe agoon is / That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but ones / To wedding in the Cane of Galilee" (NAEL line 10-11). Wisely, at no time does she reject the scripture's authority; rather she uses the authority of the scripture to undermine the loathsome and faulty presumptions of anti-feminists. This tension is characteristic of Scholasticism and more precisely, of dialectical argumentation. In so doing, she continually repositions yet another question relevant to those set forth by the dogmatists. However, she does so in such a way as to explore premises and assertions within the framework of Church authority. Chaucer is surreptitiously and with great agility elucidating the heretofore dark paths of anti-feminist theology. This prescient oppositional advocacy has the impetus of valorizing Alisoun as she is permitted to voice her knowledge of both the *sentence* and *solas*. In other words, she addresses both the scriptural authority and corporeal understanding with finesse and depth of understanding far exceeding that of the ubiquitous detractors of woman. She astutely approves her choice to marry several times as a widow through asserting God's original intention for humanity. Further, she embraces her sexuality as a wife.

Chaucer, heavily influenced by the Church, but likely dissatisfied with the oppression of women, employs Scholasticism's dialectical argumentation and rhetorical stratagem in the *Wife of Bath's Tale Prologue* as a means of bringing attention to the plight of Woman, while using the same power structure used by the Church. He effectively commandeers that arsenal to question and refute essentialist views of women. Though he voices the

countless accusations posited by anti-feminist theologians, he counters with salient defense against the ideologies of anti-feminists.

The Church, when seen as an oppositional entity provides us a clear understanding of Chaucer's quizzical dialogues. That space of history encompassed by Scholasticism, as it was, afforded the very rampart needed to interrogate the fallacious nature of the arguments made which served as a means to justify the oppression of women. In other words, a well-made argument is one which considers opposition while simultaneously contending to deconstruct, dismantle, and waylay it, which thereby proves the superiority of the sentinel argument—such is the making of dialectical argumentation.

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