

# The Wife of Bath's Prologue: One Woman's Response to Early Diatribe and Misogynist Views

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an in-depth portrait of a woman's rebellion against the early anti-feminist diatribe of 15th century England, explored through Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale". The prologue paints a realistic portrait of a widow (the Wife of Bath) who has turned her bequeathed weaving business into an international success. Her rights to continue her business depend on her marital status, which leaves questions as to the clarity of women's roles in the Middle Ages. In the complimentary text, "The Wife of Bath's Tale", Arthurian legend is turned on its head in order to draw the two texts together philosophically. The pieces are used to illustrate the sharp double standard society held for women as professionals and as wives.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath is acclaimed as one of his most fascinating characters. She gained much of her fame from the depth of her spirit, luring curious minds into her allusion-filled verse and the greater meaning of it all. Though Chaucer was male, he was successful in representing a relatively fair feminist view of the medieval woman's plight by employing wit, historical context, and individual expression. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" serves as an anti-thesis and negation of St. Jerome<sup>1</sup> and Theophrastus<sup>2</sup> deportment books<sup>3</sup>. The wife utilizes her experiential knowledge of the duality of women's roles, as well as her objections to anti-feminist writings in a parody format. She uses this literary tool in order to reverse the roles of man and wife, and to underscore her total rejection of male diatribe<sup>4</sup> and misogynist<sup>5</sup> theories and practices of her time.

The Wife of Bath is first introduced as having a 'bold' face and dressing much like a cowgirl. Her past includes 5 husbands and a successful cloth trade. Her first plight is unveiled as the duality of women's roles. The Wife of Bath is not only a wife bound by certain laws and customs of her society, but also a tradesperson and a businesswoman of the 15th century, entitled to certain rights and sovereignties within her business dealings. "Women, although...subordinate, had gained their rights in a de facto legal process...thereby introducing a conflicting set of meanings about the position of women in society" (Matrician 1). The Wife of Bath exemplifies this conflict through her attempts to be a good wife and a good businesswoman, but in return getting a less-than-satisfactory husband who abuses her and the power that she gave him. Her

only leverage is her negotiation skills, whether it is in business or in bed, with her husband. "The legal positions of craftswomen...[were] complicated because of an assortment of marriage laws" (Saunders 1). A widow, like the Wife of Bath, could receive her husband's trade after his death and continue the business if he had so desired or willed it. But the lands that were included in the will required a remarriage in order to be maintained. At the point of remarriage, many wives (and voluntarily, the Wife of Bath) lost their authority over their estate. Remarriage may have been unbearable, but independence was dependent upon marriage and became necessary.

Biblical condemnation of women runs as a strong theme throughout "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." References to Eve, as the mother of sin: "the los of al mankinde" (Chaucer l. 726), Delilah's betrayal of Sampson and the Samaritan woman. They are depicted in Janekyn's "Book of Wikked Wives"<sup>6</sup>. Janekyn<sup>7</sup> and husbands like him are likely surprised by the wife's reaction to the Biblical allusions, as they are intended to keep the marriage happy. Yet, as the Wife of Bath points out, the references her husband makes are in an attempt to gain control over his wife. He stumbles with the quotes and finds them amusing and entertaining. The point of the writings is to inspire women to give total devotion to their husbands, for "woman is the glory of man" (I Cor. 11:7), yet the portions of Janekyn's book only serve male interests and needs. It seems logical that women might despise or reject aspects of church and theology in general, based on the premise that they operate upon. This should not be confused with her piety. The Wife

<sup>1</sup>St. Jerome was the author of "Against Jovinian" which spoke out against marriage, though written by a celibate clerk.

<sup>2</sup>Theophrastus was the author of "The Golden Book of Marriage", written by a clerk from a largely misogynistic viewpoint.

<sup>3</sup>Deportment books were meant to instruct women on conduct.

<sup>4</sup>Diatribe refers to angry speech or writing attacking or criticizing women.

<sup>5</sup>Misogynist is a man who hates women.

<sup>6</sup>The "Book of Wikked Wives" was described as a lengthy collection of mythological, biblical and clerical pieces that condemn women as the root of all evil.

<sup>7</sup>Janekyn was the Wife of Bath's fifth husband in the prologue.

of Bath repeatedly makes clear that God intended well toward women, as she refuted the earlier writings with exemplars to match wits with her husband. She responds with references to Lamech, the bygamist, along with Abraham and Jacob. She also comments on the double standard of adultery, where women are painfully punished or killed, and men are often overlooked and forgiven. It seems that the Wife of Bath is well aware that women should be kind to their husbands, but it is the lack of introduction to the reverse side of the story that haunts her. The Bible backs her in Ephesians (5:28), "[So] ought men to love their wives as their own bodies". If Janekyn and any of her first four husbands were interested in what the Bible fully teaches, they would treat her with respect and not deserve the foul reponse she may render. Again, the misogynist views of early England are depicted within the limited realm of explanation of why women are treated as subservient.

Janekyn continues his obnoxious readings with mythological exemplars. He specifically makes a point about Deianira, the wife of Hercules, who accidentally poisoned him with a charm potion on his robe. The moral of the story was that a wife should be good, but the Wife of Bath seems to be eluding to a less obvious idea that if Deianira's husband had been loyal and loving to her, she would not have feared her charms were dead, and thus she wouldn't have tried the potion. As if it weren't enough, Deianira felt so guilty for burning her adulterous husband that she killed herself – a woman who sacrificed herself and became victim of the ancient writings of women's roles in the household.

The Wife of Bath continues in the Prologue to list the authors that Janekyn admires, namely Theophrastus and St. Jerome. This is where she launches a full-scale attack and a strong anti-deportment book narrative. What incenses the wife most are the readings from "The Golden Book of Marriage" by Theophrastus, and "Against Jovinian" by St. Jerome. The writings contain anti-feminist diatribe and misogynistic views of women and marriage. She makes clear her feelings toward works such as St. Jerome's in an inferred reply to his deportment book: "thou saist we wives wil oure vices hide/ Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe-/ wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewel" (Chaucer ll. 288-90). It is with this direct rejection that the Wife of Bath demonstrates her point with the allusion to the Lion's Painting. In the fable, the lion sees a painting with depictions of a man killing a lion. The lion comments that if he'd painted it, the picture would have looked much different. The Wife of Bath's main point, comedically light in approach, is that if women wrote deportment books for men, the quotes used

would be employed very differently. She continues by citing ridiculous, self-serving statements made by St. Jerome, specifically. He claims such ingenious ideas as "to support a poor wife, is hard; to put up with a rich one, torture" and "if you give [your wife] management of the whole house, you must yourself be her slave" (St. Jerome 1). It seems no wonder that she was so incensed by her husband's enjoyment of such readings. What was her power, with such limitations? After all, a husband was allowed to beat his wife if she was disobedient and allowed to kill her for adultery, yet men were allowed to say and do as they pleased, and adultery was often "discreetly overlooked" (ThinkQuest 1).

The Wife of Bath seems aware and disgusted, but her situation was again difficult. Her dual role called for her to work hard for her entrepreneurial success, yet her husband's claims are strongly backed by literature of ecclesiasts and philosophers. Her only tool of negotiation is the power of sex and money. Her business gives her the independence and travel she so desires, as well as an outlet for her own ambitions, and the power of sex is apparent through her statement that her husband "have [thar] ynough, thee thar nat plaine thee" (Chaucer l. 342). The wife decides what amount of sex seems reasonable. She refutes the Biblical notion that her body belongs to her husband, claiming she has "the power during al my life/ Upon his propre body, and nat he" (Chaucer ll. 157-58). Her view of sex is that of free will, using her "instrument as freely as [her] makere hat it sent" (Chaucer ll. 155-56). It is yet another tool for her negotiations. She also refuses to submit to notions that women should be monogamous if their husbands are not. "She may no while in chastitee abide/ That is assailed upon each a side" (Chaucer ll. 261-262). The Wife of Bath expresses that if a woman is so closely guarded and untrusted, she might as well be an adulterous wife. She will be deemed sinful by the Bible, theology, philosophy, and other male writings that Janekyn and men like him use to control and manipulate their wives and their marriages. The Wife of Bath turns the tables on the fable nature of the deportment books, and echoes St. Jerome's own decision to burn the writings with his friend Pammachius, after receiving considerable criticism for his "Adversus Jovinianum"<sup>8</sup>. The Wife of Bath therefore turns a male determination into a female statement. She demonstrates an ingenious knack for turning century-old traditions upside down, and reclaims her authority through a clever game that cost her (literally) a punch in the face, but won back her sovereignty in the end (she hits him twice and takes back her control of the household). The prologue itself acts as a statement of sovereignty.

<sup>8</sup>St. Jerome was so widely criticized for his radical views against women that he burned as many copies of his own deportment book as he could. The Wife of Bath also burned her husband's "Book of Wikked Wives", supporting St. Jerome's decision that the book wasn't worth keeping around.

The complete reversal of tradition is most apparent in the "Wife of Bath's Tale", in which Chaucer allows the wife freedom to reverse the Arthurian idea of courtly love. In the Tale, the Wife of Bath parodies the Arthurian tradition with a feminist slant, in direct opposition to the teachings of the deportment books of her day. In the "Feminine version of 'The Frog Prince', the lady herself controls the transformation" (Chaucer Page 1). Power to the woman is thus bestowed, the power for her to give or diminish at will. In direct parallel to deportment books, the "benignity of her despotism requires the absolute subservience of her mate" (Carruthers 1). As it was custom in Arthurian tales for men to work out their "own ideas of what women should be", the Wife of Bath decides what a man should be: willing to give governance and sovereignty to his wife. This is the ultimate ideal for the woman, and in this way, the Wife of Bath shows that she is "just for play", and her intentions should be carefully marked. For, "wo was him" (Chaucer, l. 1046), who looked at the tale's protagonist as a loathsome, poor and old woman. This description is probably a response to another of St. Jerome's comments, that "if a woman be fair, she soon finds lovers; if she be ugly, it is easy to be wanton. It is difficult to guard what many long for. It is annoying to have what no one else thinks worth possessing" (St. Jerome 1). Yet, through the love of a virtuous woman, this barbarian man is magically transformed into a good husband. This reversal of Arthurian tales is intended to mock the ideals of courtly love, marriage, sex, and power as exclusively male roles. In the end, the husband submits "I putte me in youre wise governaunce" (l. 1337), and, as the story goes, they lived happily ever after.

Women were given many choices for jobs in the Middle Ages, but few rights were involved and wages were grossly unfair. The Wife of Bath's trade as a cloth maker was the "most lucrative trade possible," (Carruthers 1). She could be called an entrepreneur of sorts, as she probably served as a member of a guild, traveled for business, performed the craft, managed affairs, and so on, as a 'side job' to being a wife. This work could be complicated further by the fact that women had to struggle to "sustain a position in law that entitled them to a separate identity with separate property in marriage" (Matrician 1). Being an entrepreneur was the only alternative for a woman if she did not wish to join the nunnery or was unhappy in traditional marital roles. Though limited and restricted, some of the business women of this time were quite wealthy and with wealth comes power. The only catch for 15th century women was that they still were required to defer to men. If a client owed money, the woman's spouse was expected to claim the debt for her, as well as other ways that the sovereignty was double-edged when it came to a woman's ambitious plans. "Marriage [was] the key to survival" (Car-

ruthers), and the wife simply acted in a 'shrewd' business manner. She knew her options were increased by the fact that she was a wealthy widow, and felt confident that she could have marriage her way, so long as she retained her financial sovereignty, and thus her power in the marriage. It wasn't so much an argument for women's power, but women's power vs. men's power if a choice must be made. Her strongest moral seems to highlight equality, and how it is only possible if the woman holds on to her sovereignty, and the husband is willing to submit to the sovereignty.

In an ironic twist of factual writings, the Wife of Bath succeeds in using the very sources of her anger as the sources of her statement against them. She strongly assumes the position as a wife, yet refuses to surrender her role as a businesswoman, nor will she allow clerks like Theophrastus and St. Jerome to dictate the role she should assume, as her experience bids her an advantage over a virgin male writer. In a comedic fashion, the Wife of Bath speaks volumes about women's dual roles in her society and how the confusion and problem lies in the words of misogynistic philosophers, theologians, and husbands. She renders herself free of the binds of male-driven society through her own will to control her sovereignty, and displays a strong feminist sentiment throughout her Prologue and Tale.

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**Laurie Jacobs** is a senior in English Secondary Education. This paper was written for E301, *Literature to 1600*, with Dr. Blodgett. "The original assignment was to choose any reading for our final paper to analyze in a sense of historical value. The Wife of Bath fascinated me with her courageous and early feminist views. Even more amazing, was the fact that Chaucer (a man) had so convincingly written from her point-of-view. I felt that this historical feminism was important to re-explore in the context of modern thought."