

# Looking at the wife of bath from a feminist perspective



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During the time Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales, men viewed women as the lesser of the two sexes. In writing about the wife of Bath, Chaucer draws upon much of the antifeminist sentiment of the time to satirize the idea that women are less than men. When Chaucer creates the character of Alison, he uses her as a foil to the ingrained roles that women serve. Alison, the Wife of Bath, asserts her own views on marriage and the roles of women while contradicting the customs that keep women oppressed. Even though she speaks of women dominating their men, the effect Alison wants to achieve is the balancing of power between men and women.

Alison attempts to prove that her way is better by attacking the shortcomings and double standards of the current gender roles. She calls attention to these disparities in clever ways. The wife of Bath begins her first point by saying the teachings of Christ have “taught [her] by that very precedent/That I ought not be married more than once” (Chaucer 219). She continues:

I know that Abraham was a holy man,

And Jacob too, so far as I can tell;

And they had more than two wives, both of them,

And many another holy man as well. (220)

Through recalling the lives of these holy men, Alison dispels the stigma of women who marry more than once, by stating that even holy men can have more than one wife.

The wife continues by explaining that her marriage to five husbands has given her the experience needed to make these claims. She goes on, explaining, " Three were good husbands, two of them were bad/The three good ones were very rich and old," and "[t]hey'd given [her] their land and property" (224). The old husbands are best because when they die their riches continue to make Alison comfortable, and through this custom, she shows that women hold their own type of power. When she talks of her fifth and favorite husband, Alison comes to the point of her tirade. The wife explains that her fifth husband is particularly cruel in his assessment of wives by flaunting his education. He reads to Alison from a book about wicked wives, spawning a physical fight. The fight causes the husband to realize he must yield to her, causing their relationship to reach a level of mutual respect and kindness. The husband gave her "[n]ot only management of house and land,/But of his tongue, and also of his fist" (239). Therefore, not only has the wife conquered her husband and taken control of her life, but she has introduced the crux of her tale.

The tale begins with of Arthur's knights raping a young maid, showing that even during the time of chivalry women are ruled by men. The wife then places the knight's fate in Guinevere's hands which sends the knight on a quest to discover what women really want. By putting the knight's fate in the queen's hands instead of the king's, Alison reverses the gender roles by making him reliant on a woman's mercy. This act places the focus of the story on women's needs, rather than men's. The knight eventually finds his answer by promising himself to an old hag who tells him she knows the answer to his quest. The hag requires the knight to marry her, and he

relents, giving over his youthful, masculine power to her ancient, feminine wisdom. Alison has the hag reveal that “[w]omen desire to have dominion/Over their husbands, and their lovers too” (245). Once the knight receives his answer and marries the hag, she gives him a choice between her being ugly and faithful or beautiful and treacherous. The knight replies:

Choose for yourself whichever’s the most pleasant,

Most honourable to you, and me also.

All’s one to me; choose either of the two;

What pleases you is good enough for me. (250)

This resignation proves to the hag her dominance over her husband the knight. With her new power in hand, the hag gives the knight the best of both worlds and promises to be beautiful and faithful. By giving the knight happiness in reward for passing his power to the ugly hag, Alison states the moral she wants to convey: if you trust your wife and allow her a say in your marriage, she will make you a happy man.

Chaucer uses his feminist Alison to pass on knowledge that he has learned from his own marriage. The purpose of this tale is to show that women believe the only way to achieve a happy medium is to have the pendulum swing in their favor. However, this is only necessary temporarily because after the men have relented to the powers of the women, the relationships become more fair and balanced. Underneath the wife’s rhetoric and clever reasoning is a sensitive person who understands the value of a balance of power in a relationship.

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