

About the wife of bath



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Before diving in deep in the discussions of the Wife of Bath we must realize that Critical response to the Wife of Bath has been as diverse as it has been emotive (Treharne). Some people enjoy the Wife of Bath and her unusual and wild controversial statements, saying that she is a women that has immense strength and power with her words; while others despise her comments and believe that the Wife of Bath is a women who is not a role model to younger girls. They believe she is the exact opposite of how a girl should act and carry herself.

The question still remains though if the Wife of Bath should be respected or scorned, and many people have their own beliefs on and are ready to present a compelling argument for either side. People continue to push her to the side or bring her in the spot light as someone the younger generations should look up to. As a father myself I can completely understand where these people are coming from who do not think that the Wife of Bath is not someone that they think their daughters should look up to; but I believe that they should rethink taking the Wife of Bath completely away from the younger generation.

Elaine Hansen says that we should allow the younger generation of women to be exposed to the Wife of Bath. She goes on to explain that what she does and the things she says is admirable, this is mainly because, in the time she lived in, women did not voice their thoughts and opinions the way that she did. Hansen continues, It is hardly necessary to rehearse the reasons why the Wife of Bath might well be read as a woman who defies the stereotype of the passive, submissive, and fundamentally silent female(Hansen). The way The Wife of Bath presents herself and her delivery of her words gives us our

first image of a female as a verbal artist. She is very good with her words and she uses these as strategic weapons in the war between the sexes(Hansen). If The Wife of Bath was a musical artist in today's world she would most defiantly be considered a lyrical genius. The way she carries herself would most closely resemble that of Madonna. Just as Madonna takes the stage and performs for her audience, The Wife of Bath does the same, What do I care if folks speak villainy, she follows that up with, In wifhood, I will use my instrument / as freely as my maker has it sent. (Chaucer lines 55, 155-156) Here, we see The Wife of Bath through disregard to the public opinion of how a woman should talk and carry herself. While the people of her society are eager to try and silence her, and plead with her to hush and just sit in silence and let the men dominate in her society, she stands up and expresses herself loudly.

Pulling The Wife of Bath out of the spotlight and not exposing younger women to her is exactly what James Cook advises us to do. Cook has a very different answer to the question that was posed earlier on if she should be respected or scorned. The first thing Cook draws concern to is her treatment of marriage. In none of her marriages has Alice made a full commitment of her will to the sacrament, and from that reservation follow most unhappy religious consequences, gracelessness, and loss of charity (Cook 4). Cook takes exception to the Wife's stance and lighthearted attitude to the sacred bond that marriage should be and the sins that result from this attitude. He would stick her right alongside the other wives that were in the book of wicked wives. He does have a very valid point of doing so, the Wife never truly commits to her many relationships and that is evident in her mourning of her fourth husband after his death: I wept quite long and made a sorry

cheer / as wives must, for its common usage (Chaucer lines 595-596). In this statement we can see that she is only weeping for her husband because she feels obligated to the custom. She even goes so far to admit her own infidelity while making statements such as Using that cover, I enjoyed much mirth, and also saying that a woman should show her own skin and to go caterwauling (Chaucer The Wife of Bath's Prologue Lines 405, 360). These statements shows why Cook takes exception to how the Wife disrespects her wedding vows. However, he does not stop with marriage, he then goes on to dissect and criticize the character of the Wife of Bath:

Her selective appeals to authority, her need for public approval despite private viciousness; her concern with appearances, her continual discomfort in her marriages, the tension created by the ongoing warfare between her refined sensibilities, on the one hand, and her shrewishness, lust, and coarseness, on the other—are in themselves symptomatic of the uneasy state of her soul and of her bondage to her appetites (Cook). Cook doesn't seem to care that The Wife of Bath has the courage to speak up and speak her mind. He instead targets her words and greatly disapproves of them.

James Cook feels that people should hide the Wife of Bath from the younger generations of women because of her uneasy state of her soul. Elaine Treharne has the same advice for parents but with a much glaring reason: she believes that the Wife is in over her head. She makes this argument by pointing to the prologue and how the Wife seems to be a bit scattered throughout it. Treharne says that Despite textual signals that Alison tries to control and disempower the antifeminist topos, it ultimately overwhelms her (Treharne). Treharne makes the argument that the Wife is neither right or

wrong, but that she is just simply overwhelmed. Treharne seems to show some pity and feel sorry for the Wife of Bath. The following piece from Robert Burlin shows that he believes that the Wife is just some helpless human and that she should not be held accountable for her actions:

She was preserved illiterate, allowed only the puny weapon of her own experience to contend with an armory of masculine auctoritee. No wonder, then, that the Wife uses any strategy that comes to hand to establish and defend her identity. No wonder, either, that she finds herself uncomfortably contrary, consistently obliged to assume the very position she is opposing (Burlin).

Burlin here is blaming the actions of the Wife on her surroundings, using them as sort of an excuse for the way she acts. In this excerpt he seems to be hiding himself from The Wife of Bath, much like the many people prefer to hide her away from the younger women. He also seems as if he doesn't want to argue with anyone or ruffle anyone's feathers with a point of view that is different than theirs. Treharne, on the other hand, provides us with more of an argument. She explains that the Wife gets to far over her head by trying to hard to defy the stereotypes of her society by declaring that she has ultimate sexual power and control. She just simply outdoes herself confirming the stereotype of the verbose woman (Treharne). The Wife is trying so hard to stand up to a society that is so dominated by men who believe that women should just sit in a corner and keep quiet, that she drowns herself in her speech. This is evident by the glaring amount of lines that she needs to introduce her tale. The Pardoner even grows restless in the length of her speech and tries to hurry her along, proclaiming, Now, ,

Madame, by God and Saint John / You are a noble preacher in this strife (Chaucer lines 171-172). His interlude fails to slow the her speech down as she continues sometimes going off on completely different thoughts. Burlin and Treharne declare that the Wife was just completely in over her head.

Some others can make the argument that The Wife of Bath is way too complex for anyone to understand. These people, like Burlin, tend to completely shield themselves away from the debate. Barrie Straus argues that The Wife of Bath dances to a certain beat that no one has ever or will ever be able to dance to.

The Wife of Bath is the uncontrollable voice that eludes interpretative truth. The ultimate secret she reveals is that all who think they can control, penetrate, and master such texts as she represents are deluded. All the critics can do is create interpretations that double their own desire (Straus). Straus states that the Wife is much too complex for any one of us to interpret her, and because of this there is no truth that any one can come to about her character and if she is meant to be respected or taken seriously.

I am one to agree that with so much to dissect from her prologue to her tale that she is a very complex person and it is very difficult to have the right opinion on her character because of the many ways that people can dissect her words and her actions and interpret them into their many different views. I find myself agreeing with many points that the critics have made about her. It leads me to taking multiple points from each of their arguments and making a massive painting of The Wife of Bath. Now not everyone will paint the same painting of The Wife of Bath but this is how I see my painting of

her. I see a woman of which girls should try be like. Although she has massive flaws, she defiantly has a story that everyone needs to hear.

The Wife of Bath, at this time, was controversial for a reason. She is very vulgar, strong willed, and makes improper and rude comments like, For like a spaniel, she will on him leap and declares But since I had them wholly in my hand (Chaucer lines 273, 217). In this part of her character I find myself in agreeance with Mr. Cook. The wife should be more respectful of her vows that she made to her husbands, and she should be more respectful of her body, and much more. I also believe that the Wife is too preoccupied with the way she looks, she demands to be the first one in line to the offering and wears flashy and very detailed clothing. She loves earthly items very much. Whether that be lust, money, land, or power. While these are not good things to have the utmost love for, I give her props because she is honest and admits to these things, He spoke those to those who would live perfectly / And my Lords, by your leave, that is not me (Chaucer lines 118-19). She is not a fake person by any means. She does not try to lie and say that she is perfect. It is a very admirable thing for her to be so up front and honest about herself. However, I do not believe that her vulgar, gossipy, disloyal actions, and words are to be blamed on her surroundings. We should not pity The Wife of Bath, I would go so far as to say that she may think showing pity to her may be more offensive than calling her a lustful sinner, because she is such a strong character. Yes, she is wild and bold, and sometimes that gets her into trouble and makes her look foolish, but that does not mean we should pity her. She may say, And yet, with barely bread, as Mark can tell, / Our Lord has refreshed many men quite well when it was actually John who

spoke of barley bread in the bible, not Mark; and yes, I often found myself, while reading *The Wife of Bath*, wishing that she would close her mouth. For instance, she needs to quit gossiping about her husbands private manners, (All of his secrets I'd be sure to tell) (Chaucer line 544). With all of this being said, I believe the way that the Wife can stand up and speak aloud, about whatever she wants to, is very admirable.

The best interpretation that I could come to agree most with is that of Susan Hagen. Hagen compare *The Wife of Bath* to Madonna. Hagen draws a number of parallels between the Wife and Madonna. Many similarities come to light in the flashy clothes they wear to their speech. I believe that no better comparison could be made when it comes to finding someone who the Wife of Bath most resembles in this day and age. Both of these women are fighting against the stereotypes of women. Both women also feed into them at the same time with their ways of flaunting their sexuality and their choice of words. While these two women are very controversial, they are still two powerful women with two very powerful messages, no matter what way they chose to get their stories across. I do not believe that they are the best role models for women of the younger generation but I do believe that there is something that young women should take away from both of these women. That message I believe to be is, don't be afraid to speak your mind, stand up to stereotypes, and stand behind what you believe in.