

The selfish hedonist



" I'll have a husband yet / who shall be both my debtor and my slave / [...] for mine shall be the power all his life" (Chaucer 262). In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath, also known as Alison, presents herself as the authority on marriage and marital life. She comments on the social and legal position of women in marriage and daily life. She claims she has her knowledge from experience, not from scriptural authority. She dictates her life story of her five previous relationships with her fellow pilgrims to show her experience.

Rather than rejecting scriptural authority, she appeals to logic thus rejecting too strict interpretations of scriptural rules and commandments. She gives ridiculous details of her marriages, including her marrying old wealthy men so that she could get their money once they died. After telling the unreasonable details of her relationships, she goes on to tell a tale about an old hag and one of King Arthur's knights. The old hag forces the knight to marry her after she helps him with a life-saving question of " What do women most want in life? The Wife of Bath attempts to portray the idealness of a woman's domination in the end yet she fails because the old hag becomes passive again.

Through the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale in *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer portrays the Wife of Bath as a selfish hedonist and feminist trying to gain complete control over men. Her new stand on women's supremacy only shows her selfishness because she wasn't trying to make a difference or revolutionize anything, she was only trying to gain personal benefits. The Wife of Bath's prologue is used to explain the basis of her theories on authority and sovereignty.

The medieval Church at the time of the Wife of Bath saw her as a wicked woman, and she boasts about it with pride: " If I turn difficult, God give me sorrow! " (262). " Her marrying three old men in succession is a violation of not only of the law of common sense but even of the law of Nature, who would bring together those of comparable age" (Oberembt 288). Marrying another man after already being married previously is already a scandalous crime for this time period. Now to marry someone much older than herself a few times in a row is wrong not only in the eyes of God, but it is wrong along the lines of common sense too.

The text of the Wife of Bath's Prologue is based on an allegorical 'confession' in which she tells her sins to her audience in her life story: " O Lord, I wrecked their peace / innocent they were, without remorse! " (Chaucer 268). She confesses to deceiving and tricking her husbands just so she could get money and admits to arrange a fifth marriage while still in her fourth. In doing so, she demoralizes herself to try to be better than a man. Having more power than a man means she gets to decide, yet she goes and ruins her own reputation just so she can have an edge over men.

Her rebellion against patriarchal authority and the abusive treatment of particular men expressed by the Wife of Bath are really but the projections of her selfish attitude: " His pleasures were my profit, I concurred" (269). She does not care about anyone but herself and she chooses to display that willingly. She has a self-centered interpretation of the marriage. Oberembt uses the argument that she was only twelve years old in her first marriage and that she was unable to conceive a child with her first husband which could've lead to her " frustration" (Oberembt 288).

Through her words, and mostly through her actions, the Wife of Bath expresses her views on a wife's domination through her own life story. The Wife of Bath's Tale is an exemplum, providing an answer to the question, "What do women want?" Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath to explain and give an example that women most desire sovereignty: "A woman wants the self-same sovereignty / over her husband" (Chaucer 186). The tale is Alison's idea of the perfect illustration of her point. The Knight gives in to his new old wife and therefore she becomes beautiful in his eyes because she has now been given the right to choose.

But if one was to switch the roles of men and women in society, men would become a very meek and uncertain group of people who wouldn't know how to behave. "Thus the Wife of Bath comically inverted the conventional sex-linked male and female behaviors" (Oberembt 300). When the Knight of King Arthur lets the old hag make the decision, he abandoned the male's sovereignty in favor of the woman's rule: "My dearest wife / I leave the matter to your wise decision" (Chaucer 291). The Wife of Bath most likely sees her story as what she wishes would happen normally.

But by her story, she's not changing anything or giving examples on how to change the present ways because no man is going to willingly give up his sovereignty only to have his wife rule over him. The Wife of Bath is an early extreme feminist who believed in women having the most power and command over their husbands: "You make the choice yourself" (291). "Through the Old Hag, Dame Alice persuades an unreasonable male chauvinist to renounce self-indulgence and to accept the only reasonable

norm for human conduct" (Oberembt 300). She is the only person who believes that a woman's domination will make everyone happy.

But on the man's side of the story, he is forced to give up his masculinity and become sensual only so that his wife can now become masculine. In the Wife of Bath's Tale, she attempts to convey her message that women want domination, yet with closer analysis one sees that her ideas do not seem to work out well. Chaucer seems to have made the relationship of the tale and the teller to force one to consider Alison's argument of domination. The argument in contrast to this belief is the idea that the Alison just wants a mutual relationship, one that is of giving and receiving: " His pleasures were my profit, I concurred" (Chaucer 269).

If the Wife of Bath is telling us that marriage is all about having sex with your spouse just so that they could give you fancy things and money in return, there is no sign of a revolutionary idea. McKinley states that " each spouse's body becomes the property of the other by virtue of the new marital alliance" (371). If this is the case, then the couple has the right to each other and the right to have sex with each other and there shouldn't be any type of give and take mentality. In the end of the tale, the old hag relinquishes her power and never really becomes the dominant of the two: "And have I won the mastery? said she" (Chaucer 291). She becomes a passive wife when she gives up her power by giving the knight what he wants.

This is because the knight gives her the choice to choose and it seems as though she now has complete control, yet she gives up her power when he wants to have sex with her and she resigns his power and listens to him. The

Wife of Bath's Tale ultimately contradicts Alison's belief of female domination in that the woman never gains domination over the man: " My dearest wife / I leave the matter to your wise decision [...] [Sir,] Do with my life and Death as you think best" (291). The language and acts of self-sacrifice, obedience, and submission seem to suggest the very antithesis of self-actualizing, assertive behavior which feminism [and Alison] has championed (McKinley 373). " Throughout the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Alison stands strong to the idea that women should have complete control over their husbands. One might think that the tale she would tell contains support to her ideas, but it does not. For in the end, Chaucer shows us that the Wife of Bath's idea of domination wouldn't work because she would eventually give her power up again only after just receiving it.

Therefore, Chaucer depicts Alison as a selfish woman who wants authority over her husband and yet in the end he shows how her ideas would never work. One must come to the conclusion that the Wife of Bath only tries to express her belief in a wife's complete supremacy over their husbands. In the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Alison uses her experience to verify her theories on a wife's supremacy. She also uses Biblical examples to support her ideas, such as previous Biblical characters that had multiple spouses. But her life story is evidence to her views and without her personal input one would wonder whether or not her beliefs really would work.

In the Wife of Bath's Tale, Alison most likely sees her story as what she wishes would happen normally. But with a closer look at the details, she's not changing anything or giving examples on how to change the present ways because no man is going to willingly give up his sovereignty only to

have his wife rule over him. Also, the tale ultimately proves Alison wrong because the old hag becomes passive in the end after being given the control. Alison proves her theory wouldn't work, and Chaucer tries to explain why a woman's superiority wouldn't work too well through the old hag and her decision to give into the knight's request of sex.