

A female point in the wife of bath's prology

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The Wife of Bath's Prologue: Literacy and Gender Wars

Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath is adored for her outrageous demeanor and actions in The Canterbury Tales, making her a valuable component of a poem written in this time period. At the time of the Middle Ages, church was the most influential factor of how the community functioned. Traditional medieval church's beliefs largely affect gender stereotypes such as the idea that women are inferior to men when it comes to reason and authority. As a result, men are typically educated when it comes to reading, whereas women are not frequently offered the opportunity to attend schooling. This, in turn, leaves women to gain knowledge through experiences. As the Wife of Bath tells her prologue, it is aimed to grab the attention of the clerks by explaining how she, though she may not be completely literate, is able to use her feminine qualities and men's weaknesses to gain dominance in marriage. Because a man's control in marriage was so common at this time, her prologue establishes a gender war that shuts down the formal idea that male "auctoritee" determines sovereignty over women. Being literate may seem to have the upper hand in the battle of the sexes; however, women's experience in manipulation creates power over a man's intellectual abilities.

From the beginning of the prologue, the Wife of Bath makes it shamelessly clear that her five husbands have provided her with many sexual encounters. Throughout her first few husbands, she is able to pick up a few very deceitful tricks in bed that ensure complete control over her husbands: "In wifhood wol I use myn instrument / As freely as my Makere hath it sent" (154-155). The "instrument" she refers to is the use of her vagina. This explains that

the Wife of Bath is in control of her own body and uses it as a tool to manipulate her husbands. For example, the wife is able to pretend that she desires intercourse, however, she is really using it as an economic exchange to gain wealth:

As help me God, I laughe whan I thinke

How pitously anight I made hem swinke;

And by my fay, I tolde of it no stoor:

They hadde me yiven hir land and hir tresor;

Me needed nat do lenger diligence (207-211)

The Wife of Bath cleverly uses her "instrument" as a way to sexually displease her husband. The husband may think she wants to have intercourse, but in reality, she reels him into a trap where sexual pleasure is exchanged for land and riches. She also highlights the fact that she no longer has to work hard to reach her goals of being dominant due to her experiences with her first three husbands. Even though she was not literate like her husbands, the Wife of Bath uses her sexual experiences to control the entirety of the marriages.

While her first three husbands gave her riches and land because of her sexual ploys, her fifth husband, Janekin, was whipped under her control due to the Wife of Bath's experience in manipulation and tricks. When the wife finds that Janekin owns Valerie and Theofrase, she finds a way to use the misogynistic book against him. She rips the pages out of his book, knowing

that it will anger him to some extent. When he punches her in the ear for tearing his book, she decides to trick him into thinking that she is dead. Janekin, thinking the wife is dead, declares that he would do anything if she would just live. When the Wife of Bath lives, Janekin sticks to his promise, giving her the house, land, and sovereignty over the marriage:

He yaf me al the bridel in myn hand,

To han the governance of hous and land,

And of his tonge and his hand also;

And made him brenne his book anoonright tho.

And whan that I hadde geten unto me

By maistrye al the soverinetee (819-823)

The wife clearly uses lying and deceit in a manner that gives her pleasure and reaches her aspirations. The Wife of Bath's past knowledge of sinister tricks and manipulation clearly leads her to her goal of gaining dominance, further solidifying that her husband's ability to read is heavily outweighed by her experiences.

Although the Wife of Bath typically uses her canny maneuvers to deceive her husbands, she also uses scripture references to outsmart the Pardoner into believing that each of her words is true. Due to the fact that the wife was unable to read the Bible, it is known that each allusion she makes to it is only interpreted from what she has learned by listening. However, other listeners

of the story, such as the Pardoner, are put into their place when the wife says:

Men may divine and glosen up and down,

But wel I woot, expres, withouten lie,

God bad us for to wexe and multiplie:

That gentil text can I wel understonde. (26-29)

The wife points out that men are inferior to women when it comes to reading and interpreting, but then quotes the scripture of Genesis to claim that her knowledge of the Bible is just as good as those of men. Because of her several allusions to the Bible, the other men begin to view her as somewhat educated. In doing so, men are actually proving their inferiority to women by being unable to identify the mistakes in the wife's interpretation of the scripture. For example, the Pardoner asks the wife to " Telle forth youre tale; spareth for no man, / And teche us yonge men of youre practike" (192-193). After the Wife of Bath uses scripture and other readings selectively, she is able to gain dominance over the Pardoner, who believes and wants to follow every word she says. Overall, the wife's experience in manipulation allows her to deceive the men into believing her outrageous attempts to defend herself with scripture readings.

Experiences and a passion for being sly truly allow women to take control over the gender war, even though men are more literate during this time. The medieval church may have believed that intellect and reason were the

stronger values of human nature, but the Wife of Bath uses her passion and materialistic values of human nature to defeat her husbands and many other men throughout her prologue. Although she knows society typically gives all power to the man, she uses her deceitfulness to gain the power, money, and riches of five men. Chaucer is able to develop a female point of view that is worth appreciating, even though the Wife of Bath's character would be considered extremely heinous at the time it was written. Doing this, however, creates a fantasy for the typical fourteenth century Christian woman. By introducing literacy and gender into The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer satirizes the stereotypes of women and creates an entirely new viewpoint of marriage to the fourteenth and fifteenth century.