

Female stereotypes and their role in the wife of bath



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In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" deconstructs misogynist rhetoric proposed in texts such as *Valerie*, *Theofraste*, and *Against Jovinian* (Chaucer 673-83). Respectively, *Valerie* and *Theofraste* instruct husbands on how to curtail their wives' duplicity, and *Against Jovinian* addresses the issue of female sexuality (Greenblatt 297 notes 5, 6, 7). The Wife of Bath's fifth husband, Janekin the clerk, kept a collection of sexist texts like these "bounden in oo volume" for him to easily reference (Chaucer 687). At night with the Wife of Bath as his captive audience, Janekin would "rede alway" from these misogynist works, which cast wives as shameful manipulators and husbands as moral authorities (676). Frustrated with Janekin's condescension, the Wife of Bath "rente out of his book a leef," but not because she disagreed with the text's allegations (673). On the contrary, as shown in various parts of her prologue, the Wife of Bath perceives women's inherent guile and sensuality as positive traits wives use to dominate their husbands. In other words, she accepts the same reality as her husband that women are scheming and erotic, but she interprets this reality in an antithetical way. Her unorthodox interpretation of female stereotypes poses a significant threat against men like Janekin who fail to consider the extent to which women can manipulate them.

Before presenting her argument, the Wife of Bath appeals to the presumed sexism of her fellow pilgrims, a predominantly male group. As far as she knows, these male company members hold the same opinions as her fifth husband. Therefore, at the beginning of "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" (Chaucer 1 - 8), she acknowledges her "experience, though noon auctoritee" as an ostensible profession of her lack of education (1). Even

though here the Wife of Bath initially belittles her own competence, her subsequent critical analyses illustrate her intellect and contradict this concession. She exhibits an expansive understanding of Christian discourse, misogynist literature of her time, and Roman mythology with her allusions ranging from references to King Solomon's marriages to Argus's one hundred eyes (35, 364). In her applications of these allusions, she demonstrates an analytical mind as well, for she repurposes these Biblical and classical teachings as credible resources in support of her interpretation of women's dominance over men. Thereby, in consideration of the overall prologue, this concession acts as a preemptive measure, a recognition of a bias that the Wife of Bath proceeds to dismantle. She draws the listeners into her prologue with her unassuming introduction in order to relay her riskier beliefs later on. This subtle manipulation in the context of the prologue's latter points provides a concrete rather than a narrated example of the Wife of Bath's use of deception to acquire power in her misogynist environment.

When addressing women's innate craftiness, the Wife of Bath describes deceitfulness as a necessary way for wives to both maintain control over their husbands and to derive enjoyment from their husbands' stupidity (Chaucer 403-8). Notably, this concept of women assuming the dominant role in the marital relationship through deception directly contradicts the philosophy espoused in texts like Janekin's. Nonetheless, in the Wife of Bath's opinion, women's "deceite, weeping, spinning" is a blessing from God that cannot be undervalued (407). This espousal of female hysteria both verifies generalizations about women and redefines them as assets. To support her argument, the Wife of Bath joyfully relays how she "hadde...

many a mirthe" while spying on her first three old, rich husbands when they engaged in extramarital affairs (405). In and of itself, her ability to find amusement her husband's infidelity reveals her autonomy. Rather than cowering from the situation or ignoring her husband's transgressions, the Wife of Bath would entertain herself by pestering her husband with complaints, "continuel murmur or grucching" over his infidelity (412). The Wife of Bath's victory may seem inconsequential, but the symbolism of her rebellion, rather than the magnitude of her reward, marks her true success. With her craftiness alone, the Wife of Bath bested her husbands and inverted their marriages' power dynamic; she enacted her own social justice, punishing them with her whines. Providing insight into her machinations allows the company to see the larger meaning behind her petulance. By explaining her actions, the Wife of Bath establishes further the subtle ways women exploit men without their knowledge.

This instance neatly leads into the Wife of Bath's endorsement of using sex as a bartering tool in marriage (Chaucer 415-423). In this example, the Wife of Bath punished her husband further by denying him sex. She refused his advances until he "hadde maad his raunson," and then she let him "do his nicetee" (417-8). Like a business transaction between a prostitute and her client, the Wife of Bath performed sexual favors for her husband in exchange for his money. She capitalized on her husbands' disadvantaged positions for her own benefit, a clear demonstration of her power. Furthermore, in this passage, she refers to sex as a trivial "nicetee," which exposes her indifference to or even resentment for marital lovemaking (418). The Wife of Bath goes on to explain to the company that when it comes to women, "al is

for to selle" (420). Here, the Wife of Bath builds upon the rhetoric depicting women as opportunists by construing it as a reality men should understand and abide by for the sake of their sexual needs. In other words, the women hold power over the men in sexual situations since without them men cannot fulfill their carnal needs. She assures them that for a man's "winning" she would commit "al his lust endure" with "a feined appetit" (422-3). This loaded proposal both entices and belittles men, for it provides a guaranteed way to sexual encounters albeit insincere ones. Essentially, the Wife of Bath's fabricated interest in any prospective male lover enables her to conceal her true thoughts. This ambiguity makes him vulnerable and grants her power over him. The erotic nature of her guarantee creates a conflict of interest for men—wedded or not, celibate or not. Sexual intercourse pleases them, but accepting the Wife of Bath's proposal demands on their part an acknowledgment of women's leverage. Her presentation of this ultimatum illustrates her shrewdness once again, since her open acknowledgment of her own deception in turn manipulate the company into considering the validity of her claims.

Throughout her entire prologue, the Wife of Bath's abusive relationships exist as conspicuous weaknesses in her argument. Her indifference as she details her fourth and fifth husbands' physical abuse of her seems to debase her assertion of female dominance (Chaucer 517-8, 674). However, the circumstance which led to one of Janekin's beatings and its aftermath indubitably highlights the Wife of Bath's boldness (794-804). As mentioned before, the Wife of Bath hated when Janekin read from his "volume" of anti-feminist texts (687), and one night when the Wife of Bath could no longer

bear his reading aloud of “ this cursed book,” she tore three pages out of it and punched Janekin’s cheek with such force he fell down (794-9). In retaliation, he hit her on the head, causing her to fall to the ground. At this point in her account, the Wife of Bath reveals that she “ lay as [she] were deed” until Janekin “ was aghast” (801-2). Taking advantage of Janekin’s guilt, the Wife of Bath successfully convinced her husband to burn his misogynist book after a stern reprimand (822). Here, the Wife of Bath offers a final example of her manipulative power. Even though Janekin’s beating left her deaf, she refused to assume the role of the victim. Instead, she used his misconduct as an opportunity to obtain her prerogative: the destruction of Janekin’s misogynist text.

By the end of her prologue, the Wife of Bath successfully undermines her fifth husband’s gender politics through her cunning disposition and enrapturing narration of anecdotes from her marriages. These facets, in conjunction with one another, redefine female stereotypes as positive traits God blessed women with so they could dominate men. Throughout the development of her argument, the Wife of Bath unmask this female identity for her fellow pilgrims, inciting uncertainty and self-doubt which the Pardoner expresses in his interlude (Chaucer 169-174). Based on the Wife of Bath’s characterization of women, the Pardoner no longer knows if he wishes to marry lest he lose control of his body under his wife’s dominion (172-4). The fact that his interlude occurs early on in “ The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” confirms the effectiveness of how The Wife of Bath articulates her nonconformist views. Before she even addresses the bulk of her argument, she succeeds in fracturing one of the male, religious company member’s

sexism. In effect, her provocation of these emotions both forces her listeners to reconsider their own preconceptions and captivates them right before she narrates her fictional tale. She reclaims the traits of deception and sexuality from misogynist works and reconstructs them into a formidable female identity, an identity she fully embodies.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. 9th ed. Vol. A. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. 282-310. Print.

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