

The portrayal of sin in
the wife of bath by
geoffrey chaucer and
tis pity she's a...



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Geoffrey Chaucer's poem 'The Wife of Bath' and John Ford's play 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' portray sin and punishment both in contrasting and corresponding ways.

Annabella of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' is guilty of lust, one of the seven deadly sins, and even commits adultery and incest, which the Catholic Church deem mortal sins. However, in Act Five Scene One, her soliloquy foregrounds repentance, the declarative "My conscience now stands up against my lust" suggesting she is her own prosecutor on trial, the extended metaphor showing that she finds her own "depositions characterized in guilt". This realisation of her own wrong doing, and the scene's end-focus on the declarative "Now I can welcome death", evoke sympathy in audiences, as she goes through Christian reformation, and shows willingness to martyrize herself. Even in death, the exclamatory "Mercy, great Heaven!" presents her as seeking further absolution, and makes her appear somewhat virtuous. Ford was heavily criticised for this by his contemporaries, as in Carolinian England, her sins were amongst the most damning, and therefore the presentation of her as an ultimately good, moral Christian girl was disagreeable to them.

Ironically, however, it is Annabella's penitence which results in her greatest punishment, as it is arguably the "paper double-lined with tears and blood" which causes her brother Giovanni to descend into his frenzy of "baneful plots". In Act Five Scene Five, his verse contains death imagery, declaring his own "funeral tears" to be "her mourners" at her "grave", creating an ominous tone and foreshadowing that he "Stabs her" at the scene's end.

However, his declarative "To save thy fame" indicates that his action is only

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done in protection of her, as despite the Friar's absolution, Annabella was not truly freed from penance. In 17th century England, an adulterous woman faced terrible disgrace, as the reputation of Hippolita as the "lusty widow" proved, and she would have fallen out of respect in society. The tragic irony of Giovanni's attempt to save her "good soul" from dishonour is in his failure to do so. Even in death, Annabella's repute is tarnished and she is further reprimanded, as evident in the Cardinal's rhetorical interrogative "Who could not say, 'Tis pity she's a whore?" This end-focus on her sexual activity places the blame of all the tragic events of the play in on Annabella, and therefore punishes her indefinitely.

In contrast, it can be argued that Alisoun of 'The Wife of Bath' goes largely unpunished for her lust and promiscuity. In 14th century England, common views of marriage corresponded with those of the dominant Catholic Church. It was sacred, a patriarchal institution which enabled men to control women, and be doted on by them. However, Alisoun's views clearly contradict this, as Chaucer the narrator foregrounds in the 'General Prologue' of 'The Canterbury Tales', with the declarative "Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve". Not only did she break the norm of medieval times by remarrying several times, she was unafraid to dominate within her relationships, declaring "in erthe I was his purgatorie". Making hell a metaphor for herself strongly suggests she was not at all submissive, as expected of a medieval woman, due to the Genesis story, which implied that women existed purely to serve men. Despite her defiance of traditional gender roles and her flaunting of her sins, the Wife is not punished. This is perhaps due to her own conviction that her sexual desires are not inherently

wrong, significant when compared with Annabella's self-deprecating attitude to her sexuality.

Alisoun uses biblical exegesis to justify her thoughts and actions, and it is arguably this willingness to fight against "auctoritee" which allows her to evade severe punishment. In the declarative "God bad us for to wexe and multiplie", she attempts to validate her promiscuity, wilfully ignorant of the fact that the Catholic Church preached that sexual intercourse was solely for the purpose of procreation, and not pleasure, as she chooses to interpret it. Similarly, she calls upon the stories of "the wise king, daun Salomon", declaring "I trowe he hadde wives more than oon". A feminist reading suggests that this was a subtle criticism of patriarchal double standards, that men could be allowed multiple partners, whereas a woman would be scorned and shunned for this. However, the comment is highly ironic, as Solomon turned away from God, and had his kingdom taken away as punishment, which the Wife appears to have misunderstood. Therefore, the exclamation that she wishes "To be refreshed half so ofte as he!" is blasphemous, as he was not deemed to be a man of grace. It also would have appalled readers in the Middle Ages, as a woman's sexual desire in itself was seen as dangerous, so to compare her desire to that of a man who had 1000 sexual partners would have been intensely outrageous. Despite her blasphemy, Alisoun's boldness serves her, as her verse is persuasively unrelenting.

However, her profane use of the Holy Bible does cause mistrust in the reader, and perhaps too in the other pilgrims, as her manipulation, and occasional plain ignorance, of its meaning proves her to be an unreliable

narrator. The declarative "That gentil text kan I wel understonde" is
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therefore ironic, as she actually thoroughly misinterprets it, to her own advantage. It can be reasoned then that her punishment is in her reputation, as those listening to her are sceptical of her and unconvinced by her argument. From Chaucer's 'General Prologue', readers are aware that the Wife's status matters to her, as she wears clothes "of fyn scarlet reed". It was against sumptuary laws for a common woman to wear red, as it was very expensive and generally reserved for the nobility; therefore, Alisoun projects herself as being of wealth and rank, showing an interest in this. However, it can equally be maintained that her partaking in the pilgrimage, taken as a social event by people of different social standing in medieval England, is a privilege, as she is able to look for new men to attract. This shows that ultimately, she is unpunished, as she contentedly continues to commit the same sins.

The male characters of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' and 'The Wife of Bath' on the other hand, manage to entirely escape punishment for their lusty thoughts and actions. Whereas Annabella loses her life and reputation, her male counterpart Giovanni is unscathed by their incestuous affair, his death being caused by his hubris, not by his love for his sister. He is undoubtedly the culprit of their joint sin, as evident in Act One Scene Two. The declarative "I have asked counsel of the holy Church, / Who tells me I may love you" is a lie, manipulating Annabella into accepting their relationship. Prior to this proclamation, she appears reluctant, the declarative "You are my brother, Giovanni" containing an underlying statement that they cannot be together for this reason. However, upon hearing of the Church's supposed blessing, the stage direction shows that "She kneels", a motif which is repeated in Act

Three with the Friar, and Act Four with Soranzo. A feminist reading of this sees the motif as representative of female submission to male dominance, and it can be argued that this is the key difference between Giovanni and Annabella, and the reason for their divergent fates. Carolinian audiences would have viewed her as weak, and therefore her downfall inevitable, whereas whilst he is unlikable due to his hubris, Giovanni's status as a man allows him control in the situation throughout the five acts. He does not expect punishment for his lust, the audience do not expect his punishment, and therefore, he evades it.

Similarly in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath', the knight is guilty, it being foregrounded in the Tale that he is "a lusty bachelor". Violent imagery is used to describe his rape of the "maide", with a lexical set of aggression in the abstract nouns "force" and "oppressioun", and dynamic verb "raffe". Despite this, he does not suffer for his sinful action, reflective of the patriarchal order of medieval England. As a man, and a man of status, belonging to the "hous" of "king Arthour", he is protected, whereas the innocent young maid he attacked is left vulnerable. Chaucer may have been criticising the feudal system, suggesting that power breeds corruption, as Ford does in 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' when the Bergetto's murderer, Grimaldi, is received "Into his Holiness' protection" in Act Three Scene Nine, simply for being "nobly born". The knight endures "twelf-month and a day" of nearly fruitless searching, but that is as close to penance as he comes. Chaucer's readers however, may have viewed the knight's submission to the "olde wyf" as punishment enough. She addresses him in imperatives such as "Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand", and declaratives "The nexte

thing that I require thee, / Thou shalt it do", placing him in her command.

That he replies in acceptance with the declarative "Have heer my trouthe...I grante" would have been seen as degrading in the Middle Ages, as men were meant to be superior and powerful beings. As Genesis suggested that women were created to serve men, this was societies' expectation, and Chaucer's reversal of gender roles here would have astounded many.

However, it is arguable that his submission is worth it, as the knight is rewarded at the end of tale with a wife who meets all the ideals of a medieval woman. This is evident in her repetition of "bothe", which has an intensifying effect on the declaratives "I wol be to yow..." and "...fair and good". The knight's luck in finding this woman is further emphasised in the declarative "I to yow be also good and trewe" and the extended simile "I be to-morn as fair to seene / As any lady, emperice, or queene". As the nouns in the latter polysyndetic list hold regal denotations, she is elevating her beauty, whilst the former adjective pairs connote honesty, faithfulness, and kindness. In this, she defies female stereotypes, as she is neither the beautiful seductress nor the hideous but good hearted woman. Therefore, it is indisputable that at the close of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', the "lusty" knight is unpunished for his sin. It can even be maintained that he is rewarded for his initial display of power.

Geoffrey Chaucer in 'The Wife of Bath' and John Ford with 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' present sin as something to be punished accordingly. However, judgement is not made on the severity of the sin, but on the sinner, which leads to unjust punishment. It is shown that in patriarchal society, both in the 14th and 17th centuries, as well as 17th century Italy, where 'Tis Pity She's

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a Whore' is set, women were more likely to be punished than a man who commits the same wrong, and those who were of a higher rank in the chain of being were often protected by their status. It is notable that Ford does not condone this exploitation, creating sympathy for the punished character of Annabella, but places it in a condemning context, that of a Catholic Italy, which Protestant Carolinian audiences viewed as a highly corrupt state. Chaucer on the other hand, shows an inherent contempt for women, unsympathetic and crude in his presentation of the aggressive, " gat-tothed" Alisoun. However, she is not harshly punished, and so it can be said that he too saw flaws in the misogynistic attitudes in England at the time. The writers both gave punishment for sin where the characters expected it, but were less adherent to the demands of their readers and audiences, in order to challenge their views on the gravity of sins and the appropriate penalties.