

The wife of bath by geoffrey chaucer: analysis of the two contradicting personas ...

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Ganim asserts that the Chaucer's Canterbury Tales was "deeply implicated and interested in the burning issues of his day" and Oberembt builds on this by stating that "we must, of course, affirm the omnipresence of misogyny in the Middle Ages and the anti-feminist bias of many great minds of this era". However, in the Prologue of The Wife of Bath, the conflicting opinions voiced by the Wife complicate the reading of the text as an attempt to shed light on the inescapability of the patriarchal society as the Wife's attempts to subvert male supremacy is drowned out by her own internalisation of female objectification.

In the characterisation of the Wife as both a subservient wife and an aggressive resistor of male dominance, a paradoxical narrative voice is constructed. And through this duality of the Wife's voice of expression, as she appears to both resist and affirm female roles of inferiority, the satiric tendencies of the text are challenged. Moreover, by characterising the Wife as an exaggerated caricature of a loose woman, and empowering her through the use of direct first-person narration, the Wife seems to selfishly uplift herself rather than to serve as a representative voice of the females in her society. This portrays the Wife's true intention in a confusing manner, questioning the Wife's intent in subverting or following the patriarchal society. The ambiguity of the Wife's characterisation through her contradictory actions and voice could thereafter suggest the imposing nature of society as any attempts at escaping societal expectations appear to be futile. In Chaucer's the Wife of Bath, the Prologue acts as a space for the Wife to voice out her dominance over men. But yet, in her attempt to assert power over the two listeners of her tale, the Wife is characterised as a crude

and coarse woman by the way in which she speaks. She recounts her past experiences with multiple husbands to her male listeners, Friar and the Pardoner and is granted a chance to teach the two young men of her experiences whilst presenting her husbands in a derogatory manner.

As Friar and the Pardoner follow her storytelling intently, wanting the Wife to “telle forth youre tale; spareth for no man, and teche us yonge men of your praktike”, she speaks of how she had subdued her three elderly husbands and had them “maad his raunson unto me; thanne wold she suffree him do his nicetee”. As she describes the transaction of sex and riches, the Wife presents her past partners as subservient, raising her to a position of power over the men in her life while portraying herself with an air of authority. In ridiculing her husbands’ inadequacies in bed, she outwardly expresses how her husbands “broghte it so aboute by her wit, That they moste yeve it up, as for the beste. For thogh he loked as a wood leoun, Yet sholde he faille of his conclusioun” in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. The Wife makes light of her husbands’ possible insecurities and lets Friar and the Pardoner, who are mere strangers, in on the personal problems faced in her marriages. This public exposé of private and personal matters in her marriage suggests the crude and insensitive nature of the Wife as she selfishly sacrifices the reputation of her husbands in order to empower herself. This is supported by both Mead who envisions her as a “pushing, noisy woman, much like any commonplace shrew” and Slade who describes the Wife’s speech as “adult, aggressive, matter-of-fact, and sexually pre-occupied”. And in examining the explicit manner in which the Wife speaks of her sexual encounters and desires without the use of euphemisms, it is exemplified that the Wife’s

effort to raise herself to a position of power is contradictory as she unknowingly degrades herself into an image of a selfish shrew through her speaking of her husbands.

The ambiguity of the Wife's true stance on the male dominance in her life is also highlighted in her personal internalisation of females as a mere object of desire of men. As the Wife takes pride in how her appearance and sexual prowess had attracted men to "bringe me gaye thinges fro the fayre", she unknowingly objectifies herself and acknowledges her identity as a woman recognised only for her ability to please men. The depiction of herself by stating that her "housbondes tolde her, she hadde the beste quoniam mighte be" establishes how others only valued the Wife for her physical body and not for her wit or intellect. And by following her declaration of herself as a descendant of Venus because of her "prente of Sainte Venus seel" with the affirmation of her physical beauty, it is suggested that the Wife was proud of her 'best quoniam', and not ashamed of her body being objectified.

The Wife's overall haughty tone of voice throughout the entire Prologue also builds on the idea that she was proud and accepting of her objectification. Her repeated use of the pronoun 'I' creates an air of triumph in the Wife's tone, suggesting a narcissistic nature as makes herself to be the focal point of the Prologue. This narcissism reflects upon her pride in being seen as an object of desire for men and therefore points at her internalisation of the female identity as a tool of male desire. At the same time, while the Wife's accepting of female objectification adds to the ambiguity of her stance on male dominance, her speech also serves to widen the gap between the men

in her life and herself, affirming the inherent idea of male superiority. In the use of the euphemism ' quoniam' by the men in her life to replace the explicit term for the Wife's body, the voices of the males are portrayed as more refined and subtle. This is a stark contrast from the Wife's crude descriptions of her husbands in her saying " gode lief, tak keep How mekely loketh Wilkin oure sheep" as she neglects the use euphemisms in describing her encounters in bed and speaks directly of them. This adds to the characterisation of the Wife as a " commonplace shrew", which Mead attributes to " very loose and coarse" way of speaking and hence undermines the Wife's attempts at depicting female superiority as she unknowingly raises the status of men through her quoting of their speech. This adds to the confusion in the Wife's conflicting actions and paradoxical voice as she appears to both affirm her identity as inferior while trying to transcend the imposed female gender role of subservience.

The Wife's attempt to portray herself as an equal to the male figure by highlighting her knowledge of religion and intellectuals makes the analysis of her character increasingly problematic as the Wife does not appear to empower the female community but instead uplifts herself to the status of a male. While her previous attempts at subverting the patriarchal society relied on the erasure of male dominance, the Wife's quoting of scholars and biblical references portray herself as more superior to the rest of the females in her community. In quoting the astronomer, Ptolomee, of his proverb " of all men his wisdom is the hyeste, that rekketh nat who hath the world in honde', the Wife displays her intellectual ability as she is able to understand and appreciate texts. This enables her to subvert the idea of female

inferiority as women are typically thought to be illiterate and not well-versed in scholarly proverbs. Similarly, as the Wife quotes the Apostles, she expresses how she enjoys reading the religious text in “ al this sentence me liveth everydeel”. Here, it could be interpreted that she is trying to resemble her fifth husband, Janekin, who had quoted the “ proverbe of Ecclesiaste” in order to pressurise the Wife into being subservient. Mimicking the actions of men, the Wife upholds the qualities of the male in order to be seen as equal and not inferior to them, erasing her personal inferior female identity. Simultaneously, through the depiction of her knowledge of religion, the Wife attempts to justify her own personal desire and escape the identity of them as “ legally inferior to men, and that they were expected to know their place and keep it”.

Longworth observes that the Wife uses the same biblical texts that Jerome’s letter *Adversus Jovinianu* references in order to “ in order to vindicate her sexuality and marriages” and strengthen her authority. On the pretence that “ God bad for us to wexe and multiplie”, the Wife uses to this substantiate her rejection of polygamy as a sin. She then goes on to find loopholes and manipulate the words of the Apostles as she argues “ For hadde God commanded maydenhede, thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede. And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe, Virginitee, thanne wherof shold it growe?”. In the expression of her manipulative argument, the Wife makes a parody of poetic structure of religious texts, using rhyme to deliver her speech in a more refined and elegant tone of voice. This facade of refinement enables the Wife to use the words of God to support her own lust and sexual desire, as she cites her openness to the creation of more virgins.

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Through this, she is then able to defy the set expectations of her as a subservient and loyal wife. However, the need to twist religious references to justify her personal lust and desire also hints at the haunting nature of female oppression, as the Wife fears the consequences of her outward defying of the expected behaviour of a female. This interpretation of the Wife's fear is supported by Oberembt, who depicts how the Wife does not "acknowledge outright adultery" but instead "delights her auditors to think the worst" as she "confesses to deceiving her old husbands". Her refusal to directly admit to her sin of adultery highlights her fear of punishment for breaking away from the subservient wife role.

The Wife's fear thereafter suggests that the Wife is still haunted by the societal expectations of women as property to their husbands, alluding to the entrapment of women in their inferior identities. This dual effect of the Wife's referencing of religious texts goes on to support the idea of the Wife's unreliability as her actions seem to both adhere to and subvert the expectation of female subservience. In the problematic characterisation of the Wife as both a subservient woman and a shrew who resists societal patriarchy, the question of the Wife's true intention remains. Acknowledging that the Wife's anti-misogynist tendencies "does not silence the misogynists among the Canterbury Pilgrims", it could be interpreted that the Wife yearns to escape societal expectations but is still tied down by the obligations imposed onto her by both society and her mother, of whom she "folwed ay her dames lore". And owing to the haunting weight of societal pressure of an individual, the Wife's character finds it difficult to escape her fate, as she

faces the dilemma of whether or not to denounce the idea of female inferiority.

The two contradicting personas portrayed by the Wife through her actions and speech could represent the opposing sides of expectations; the subservient woman and the loud-mouthed shrew. Thereafter, in reading Chaucer's the Wife of Bath, it could be argued that the construction of the Wife's shrewd character was not to present anti-misogynist tendencies. Rather, the Wife's entrapment in the patriarchal society served as an example of the imposing nature of society on an individual in general, accentuating the immense power of societal expectations.