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# The matriarch of Bath – Chaucer’s feminist insights

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**Abstract:** This paper critically analyzes Geoffrey Chaucer’s character Allison of his tale “The Wife of Bath” within the *Canterbury Tales*. The argument is made that Chaucer intentionally used this character to present his personal feminist ideals to his audience, thereby acting as an advocate for women under the guise of literary author. Evidence will be presented both from the text by analyzing her characterization, imagery, and dialog while the weight of this thesis will rest upon *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* evidence presented by scholars, particularly from the “Chaucer Review” scholarly journal, as well as research conducted on the life and times of women during the medieval era.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Chaucer, Matriarchal, Canterbury, Bath

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While all women in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* share the characteristic of being far more independent and verbal than what was to be considered the norm in the Medieval Ages, *The Wife of Bath* is set far apart both her fellow pilgrims as well as the women of Chaucer’s time with her distinctly matriarchal and feminist view points. Evidence suggests Chaucer seems to have had an ulterior motive by creating such a character as to show an alternative view of women during a patriarchal time. In the case of Alison, the *Wife of Bath*, Chaucer did not create her as a mere form of entertainment, but a subtle, yet far reaching tool to help women be seen as something more than property. While Alison will be the primary focus of this paper, there will be references and evidence of such ideas also presented regarding the other women of Chaucer's *Tales*. However, it will be through the imagery, characterization, and dialog used with the *Wife of Bath* that Chaucer pushes the traditional ideas of what a woman should be during his time and provides an outlet through which to subtly plant the seeds of feminist understandings for his readers.

## 1. Writing in the 1300’s

During the 1300’s, the ability to write was considered an art form. Similarly, reading was something to be treasured by the upper class. It is generally understood that the lower classes likely knew of tales and stories from print sources. However, they would have been told these stories orally.

Authors were more likely to be part of the upper classes for which they wrote. In turn, Chaucer was both influenced by the politics of the time while his status also afforded him the ability to be highly influential. Barbara Hanawalt, author of *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* explains that “Chaucer was most assuredly ‘of the royal household.’ He spent his formative years and much of his adult life in the service of kings, queens, and princes, and his development as a poet was shaped by the influences opening up to him through royal service in England and overseas” (Hanawalt 7).

When it is stated he was “part of the royal household,” this is through the position of chief clerk of the king’s works in Westminster by King Richard II on July 12, 1389 (Wheeler). This appointment is in addition to his early life serving as page in his adolescent years, and later fighting with Edward III in France, where he was captured. Edward III paid for his release and later began serving Edward III and his uncle, John of Gaunt at which point his writing career can begin to be tracked (History.com). Starting in 1372, Chaucer began his travels to Italy on missions of a diplomatic nature, possibly making the acquaintance of Dante, Petrarch, and most notably, Boccaccio. It was around this time which Chaucer was appointed Comptroller of Customs during his visit to Flanders and France. Because Chaucer was a very well traveled man, he was fortunate enough to see different cultures and social constructs, likely providing the spark to which began his writing of *The Canterbury Tales* in the late 1380s – early 1390s.

## 2. Chaucer's Unique Position

Chaucer was in a uniquely privileged position between two kings, affording him the opportunity to exercise discretion and political savvy in order to deposit his feminist ideals (at this point, it should be noted the term "feminist" in regards to Chaucer's ideas are a purely modern term which Chaucer would not have knowledge of. However, Chaucer's references and ideas presented in regards to women were so non-traditional and unheard of that there was no term for such ideas. For ease of understanding and simplicity, this modern term is being used for this paper.) Chaucer demonstrates himself as a true master at playing a game of delicate symbols. The question becomes: how can he ensure his work would be picked up and read by those who had the power to create change within the accepted societal norms of his day. The cover of his Tales has its own story to tell in this regard. Stephanie Trigg, author of *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern states*.

## 3. Symbolism within the Artwork and its Effect

There remains to make one obvious point about this front cover illustration: as an image of an exclusively male company of pilgrims, it implies a male readership. For the Royal illuminator, characterization might be dispensable, but gender is not. It is a measure of Chaucer's reputation as a generalist, as a writer interested in women, if not, indeed, as an androgynous writer, that the absence of women does not stand in the way of this appealing representation of the Chaucerian community and the welcome it seems to extend to the prospective reader or buyer, of the book and the academic and cultural capital it signifies (Trigg xvii).

Chaucer understood that including women in his cover would have likely caused his target aristocratic audience shy away. By continuing the traditional all male representations, he ensured his work would be read and spoken. Thus, the cover of his Tales became a clever tool to ensure his ulterior motive would be carried out.

## 4. Alison: Chaucer's Anterior Motive

Upon reading Chaucer's Tales, many find themselves taken with the different characters, many of whom would have been seen as similar in stature and type to his target audience. However, the one character that stood out the most during the time, and has continued to stand out even into the modern day, is Alison, The Wife of Bath. Gillian Rudd, author of *Complete Critical Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* explains that Chaucer used sources of the time that portrayed "only wicked wives" and used those "stereotypes and makes them the basis of personal strength. In so doing she acknowledges the power of stories to mould our expectations and of the importance of taking the teller into

account: 'Who peyntede the leoun, tel me, who?' (Tales, III: 692). Chaucer's fascination with narrative position and control is evident here, as it is in the Tale the Wife tells" (Rudd 122). By taking the teller into account rather than simply the character or simply the audience, there is a greater feeling of authority given to the content while also creating a deeper interest in what is being told. In other words, both Alison and the narrator become personal symbols of personal strength and subversion of collective authority. This idea allows the mind to further open and receive the planted information surrounding women's equality which Chaucer has placed within this character.

To introduce the character Alison, The image presented is one which would have taken most of his readers by surprise. Chaucer provides his readers with a first impression of Alison in a stark contrast to the other women of the pilgrimage that is *The Canterbury Tales*. The General Prologue of the Wife of Bath provides a picture of Alison as being flamboyant, but not exactly a true beauty,

Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground; I dare have sworn they weighed a good ten pound, The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head. Her hose were of the finest scarlet red And gathered tight; her shoes were soft and new. Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue. A worthy woman all her life...She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say. Easily on an ambling horse she sat Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat As broad as is a buckler or a shield; She had a flowering mantle that concealed Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that (Chaucer 15).

The reader is given the impression of a wealthy older woman, but not necessarily an attractive one. She is called "handsome" however, the impression here might be a generous statement given her gap teeth and bold, red hued face. Her clothing is over the top and seems to be a way to show off her wealth. According to the article, "Color of Power," written by the organization *Pigments Through the Ages*,

Strict clothing regulations were enforced in Europe up to the times of the French Revolution. Pure colors were reserved exclusively for the rich nobility. Preparation of pure bright colors from natural sources was very tedious. Development of complex technical processes such as extracting of carmine from the cochineal insects or red dyes from the madder plant made it finally possible to achieve bright red tones. Wearing red coats was the exclusive right of the nobility in medieval times and the red robes of kings, cardinals, judges and executioners announced their power over life and death (*Pigments Through the Ages*).

## 5. Alison's Power

In addition to being an extravagant and ostentatious color, red also symbolizes passion and power. Alison's clothing matches her red hued face, making it obvious she is almost oozing sexuality and exuberance. It is clear this woman has gained a substantial amount of money, more than likely through the deaths of her husbands. She wishes not only to show off her wealth, but sees herself as nobility rivaling

that of noble men. The power of her own life and sexuality is made clear through her choice in colored garments. The fact her stockings are red, given Chaucer’s rather vulgar and less than modest taste in humor at times, symbolizes power over her sex.

Alison’s clothing, attitude, and the use of her sexual tools are not the only way she uses power however. The fact is, men are not the only ones she is exuding power over. Thomas Van, *Author of False Texts and Disappearing Women in the ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale’* states, “Being mysterious and controversial is itself a form of power, and for a gender which the other gender traditionally stereotypes as having to out with all secrets to have the ultimate outsider, a male and a rapist, sentenced to find out and report their secret of secrets is sauce extraordinaire for any revenge” (Van 187). Given the fact the Wife of Bath has been touted as one of the most engaging, interesting, and intriguing characters of Chaucer’s writings, perhaps even in history, acts to prove this assertion that she has truly held power over her audience since this tale’s inception. She rules the conversation within her prologue while catching the attention of her audience with shock and awe. This is an ingenious way to hold power, particularly feminine power, over both genders as readers. It could be seen that Chaucer was proving a point that women could hold the attention of a large scale audience and make an impact equal to, or even more intense, than that of any man. For a man to tell a tale of sexual prowess and take the upper hand through trickery of a violent relationship would be nothing new, and perhaps even expected. The idea that a woman could do the same would have been shocking. Hidden on the guise of comedy and absurdity, Chaucer was able to bring up the idea while blaming comedic creativity. In other words, by virtue of the sexual power Alison wields, she is able to hold sexual power over men, but also captures the attention of her readers since sexual power was unexpected for a woman in Chaucer’s time. This idea of “sex sells” has been used for centuries on a subconscious level to pass along subconscious information. A modern day example is a sexy woman resting on the hood of a new car to sell the latest model. Clearly, Chaucer was extremely smart in using sex partly as an attention grabber, and partly to covertly extend his feminist ideas.

## 6. Chaucer: A Voice for Women

Why would Chaucer have bothered writing such a character as Alison? In a time when the accepted mode of thinking was a strict patriarchal society, the theories are vast. Chaucer was able to see the plight of women during this time and created the Wife of Bath as a way to show his understanding to his readers. He did so to reach a larger audience that included women. In order to show his audience that women are just as capable as men at thinking and acting in a dominate manner. It is important to note that feminism is largely a modern term which came about in the

20th century. Chaucer would not have known of this term during his time; however, this does not mean he would have not had the sort of ideas associated with this term. The article “Naughty By Nature: Chaucer and the (Re) Invention of Female Goodness in Late Medieval Literature” by Joanna Shearer states that Chaucer,

As a person living in the fourteenth-century, he would have had no vocabulary to either comprehend or translate this term [feminist/feminism] as well as its various meanings. However, in spite of this gap between medieval and modern, it is possible to assert that he would have been cognizant of the profound inequities that women faced both legally and spiritually compared to men. It is this perception that informs much of Chaucer’s writing in the sense that he frequently plays with notions of what constitutes “good” and “bad” as they are often falsely constructed by those in power, and it is in his humorous reversals of these categories that renders him more sympathetic than most towards women, even if he isn’t quite feminist in any modern sense of this term (Shearer, 8).

## 7. Feminism through Humor

Shearer touches on the humorous quality of Chaucer’s writing which is an important aspect in the delivery method of his characters and tales they tell. It was considered blasphemous to indulge the idea of women being equal to a man in any facet. Because reading was considered an elitist pastime, the likely audience would be the highly influential of the time period. Chaucer, having known this, would need to find a covert method to infuse his social ideals. Thus, the creation of Alison becomes a perfect method in which to do so.

One area which provides insight into Chaucer’s ulterior motive of subtly introducing Alison as an example of women’s ability to be placed in traditionally male roles and perform equally as well is in the reference to her as a school master. Jane Chance, author of *Mythographic Chaucer: The Fabulation of Sexual Politics* elaborates on this idea,

Chaucer’s friar, a “leevemaister/” appears in his Prologue to praise the Wife of Bath for touching “in scole-matere greet difficultee” (1272), although he simultaneously advises her, as if afraid of some Wycliffite inclinations on her part, that she should speak instead “of game” and “leteauctoritees ... / To prechyng and to scoles of clergy” (1275-77).<sup>1</sup> For him to perceive her as mimicking a “leevemaister” introduces for the reader a different interpretation of the much-debated issue of “maistry,” one that involves the schoolmaster’s method of peering beneath the veil of classical artifice to see truth (in the Macrobian sense). Although Alisoun clearly uses the fruits of patristic exegesis for her own “up-so-down” purposes, she also demonstrates her “mastery,” that is, her understanding of the allegorical glossation of classical mythology found in medieval glosses and commentaries. Because medieval schoolmasters were in fact male, her use of the characters and gods of classical mythology casts her in the

incongruous role of what might be termed a protofeminist (rather than an antifeminist) mythographer who inverts and subverts the conventions generally in use within that patriarchal tradition (Chance 214).

It is clear that though Chaucer's writings tend to play with the understandings of certain types of people and professions during his time, and no one is exempt. Such is the case with the Prioress and the Summoner in *The Canterbury Tales*. These two religious officials clearly hold little spirituality considering the way they act and present themselves to those they are supposedly trying to save. From Chaucer's writings, it is clear that corruption in the church was a rather natural and common occurrence, yet his writings seem to amplify them for comedic effect. It is possible the *Wife of Bath* is being amplified in a similar way, but with a less derogatory direction and more of a way to show men and his audience that women can rule the roost just as well as a man, even with less societal power granted to them.

## 8. Shock Value

Given the fact that women were little more than a possession during the Medieval Age, the *Wife of Bath* more than likely came as a shock to some of Chaucer's audience. Her views on sex are remarkable. Not simply because she openly states her enjoyment of it, but because she has used it as a tool to control her husbands. Women were not thought to enjoy sex. Thus, sex was used by men to control women. The *Wife* has found a way to change this traditional view in marriage, while turning the tables on control. Kenneth Oberembt, author of *Chaucer's Anti-Misogynist Wife of Bath* states,

The conventional belief that man has a stronger propensity toward Reason than woman and the subsequent claim that men deserve to be women's masters Dame Alice has tested upon her own pulses and found to be wanting. Her several husbands have proven to her that traditional Authority unsatisfactorily comprehends sexual behavior and marriage – as she knows them to be... The thrust of the *Wife's* Prologue and Tale is only to criticize and to correct Authority by means of Experience, not to depose it, and in serving up her audience five spouses who disprove traditional assumptions about sexual behavior, Alice evinces the need for correction (Oberembt 294).

However, the wife is not simply a woman speaking her mind. She is a highly intelligent woman speaking her mind and using extensive biblical knowledge and quotes to back up her thoughts and feelings just as a man would (and has been done in many other areas of Chaucer's writings such as the *Friar's Tale of Chanticleer* with his use of lengthy quotes and evidence to support his idea that dreams are premonitions to the future.) Alison defends her way of life by quoting King Solomon, St. Paul's reproach that one should marry rather than burn in hell. Alison even questions some areas of the Bible, asking why it was so strange for a woman to marry more than once in her life if a man is

permitted to having more than one wife at a time. David Benson extends the ideas she presents,

The *Wife* produces a travesty of traditional Christian teachers about marriage with her brilliant spoof of medieval logic and biblical quotation. Question: Should one marry more than once? Answer: Christ's views on this are difficult to understand, but certainly God's 'gentil text' bidding us to 'wexe and multiple' is clear enough – and look at all Solomon's wives (III, 9-44). Question: Is virginity commanded? Answer: If so, where would new virgins come from? And does not a household need wooden vessels as well as gold? And why then were humans given 'membres of generacion' (62-134)? (Benson, 134).

The wife makes a rather valid point here: How can virginity create a population, let alone more virgins? Logically, one must continue having sex to create more virgins, proving that a household must have "wooden vessels as well as gold," meaning good and bad, pure and impure, virgins and sinners to create society. She does not claim to be pure by any means, but her biblical logic seems to give her the strength and power to continue living her life with the idea that sex is good and she intends to continue having as many husbands as she can to continue her way of life. However, it should be noted that she does not marry because she needs a husband or a man in her life. She does not need to be ruled over or have a man take care of her in anyway. She is a wealthy woman thanks to her previous marriages and does not apologize or regret the way she has lived or is living her life. She enjoys the sovereignty that she has gained over her many husbands and encourages other women to follow suit.

## 9. Sovereignty

It is the topic of sovereignty which precludes the theme to her tale of the knight who rapes a young woman. Justice is of course expected by the people against the knight and the queen is granted the opportunity to decide the fate of the rapist knight. She sentences him to find that which women more desire. An old woman agrees to help the knight,

'Give me your hand,' she said, 'and swear to do Whatever I shall next require of you – If so to do should lie within your might – And you shall know the answer before night.' 'Upon my honor,' he answered, 'I agree.' 'Then,' said the crone, 'I dare to guarantee Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim...' (Chaucer, 286).

While it is the knight's life which is on the line, it takes this drastic measure for him to allow dominion of a woman over his life.

Once the old woman tells the knight the secret of that which all women desire, they make their way back to the queen,

There sat the noble matrons and the heady Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace of wisdom, all assembled in that place, And there the queen herself was throned to hear And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near And silence was commanded through the hall...He

stood not silent like a beast or post, But gave his answer with the ringing word Of a man's voice and the assembly heard: 'My liege and lady, in general,' and he, 'A woman wants the self-same sovereignty Over her husband as over her lover, And master him; he must not be above her (Chaucer, 287).

This tale, like many others, has a straight forward moral: Women should have dominion over their husband just as men have had dominion over their wives for so long. It is clear the knight of her tale is less than pleased once he is asked to keep his promise to the old woman for saving his life. She wishes to marry him, to which the knight is shocked and disgusted because of her old age. He is forced to do so and remains in a state of sadness and disgust for some time, all the while his new wife is smiling and quite pleased with herself. She takes this opportunity to use her knowledge to explain and defend herself, "you taxed me, sir, with being old. Yet even if you never had been told By ancient books, you gentlemen engage, Yourselves in honour to respect old age. To call an old man "father" shows good breeding, And this could be supported from my reading (Chaucer, 290)." This woman is obviously well read and can support her ideas, just as Alison can, and often does, with literature. Her goal is to help change her husband's way of thinking and be happy with his new life just as women were expected to be happy with being ruled over.

It should be noted here that one area of debate on the Wife's credibility of being a possible feminist comes from the fact she uses scripture, but badly so. She seems to misunderstand and use biblical quotes in her own favor without elaboration. Gloria Shapiro, author of "Dame Alice as Deceptive Narrator" has found some valid points that actually point to this fact in favor of the Wife rather than against her,

That she misunderstands scripture is not so much an indication of a flawed intelligence as it is an aspect of humor. We cannot expect of Dame Alice (as we could not expect of any woman of her position in Chaucer's time) the rigor of the scholar. She would not have had appropriate training; she would not have had access to texts. What we do note about her, on the other hand, is that in spite of her scholarly deficiencies, in spite of her reliance on tertiary sources, she makes a vigorous intellectual effort to understand and to explain her life in terms of God's purpose as revealed through scripture (Shapiro, 137).

Thus, her misunderstandings of scripture are placed for comedic effect (she is after all a fictional character written by a man with no prior understanding of the conventional ideals of feminism, and thus must continue to adhere to some forms of comedy in this tale. The message still manages to get across to his female readers however, regardless.)

In the end of Alison's tale, the wife gives her husband a choice,

'You say I'm old and fouler than a fen. You need not fear to be a cuckold, then. Filth and old age, I'm sure you will agree, Are powerful wardens over chastity. Nevertheless,

well knowing your delights, I shall fulfill your worldly appetites. 'You have two choices; which one will you try? To have me old and ugly till I die, But still a loyal, true, and humble wife That never will displease you all her life, Or would you rather I were young and pretty and chance your arm what happens in a city Where friends will visit you because of me, Yes, and in other places too, maybe. Which would you have? The choice is all your own' (Chaucer, 291).

The wife gives her husband an interesting choice. He cannot have his cake and eat it too, but must make a choice between an unattractive mate who will remain faithful or a beautiful wife who may cheat and be disloyal. At this point, it is rather unclear if the husband has finally understood the concepts which his wife has been attempting to pound into him; that women deserve as much sovereignty over their husbands as husbands have always been granted over their wives. The other theory is at this point, the husband has simply been worn down, so to speak, and is giving into his wife's will in the hopes she will finally stop her lectures. Bernard Levey, author of "The Wife of Bath's Queynte Fantasye" seems to think it is neither of these ideas, but more the thought the knight has been truly and honestly converted in thought. He states, "the Loathly Lady enters on her lengthy sermon on gentillesse. It is the Hag's pillow lecture on gentillesse that apparently 'converts' the knight, convincing him that she really is offering grace and mercy and that he should yield to her. In her sermon she sets out to demonstrate that, though she is of low birth, she has true gentillesse. Such gentillesse, she claims, is a matter of virtue, of true nobility of character, and comes from the grace of God" (Levy 107). It is this "gentillesse" that causes the knight to finally see his wife's character rather than her physical body and allows him to realize her gentillesse is stronger than most men's, including his own.

Regardless of the reason, this has pleased his wife,

'And have I won the mastery?' said she, 'Since I'm to choose and rule as I think fit?' 'Kiss me,' she cried. 'No quarrels! On my oath And word of honour, you shall find me both, That is, both fair and faithful as a wife; May I go howling mad and take my life Unless I prove to be as good and true As ever wife was since the world was new! And if to-morrow when the sun's above I seem less fair than any lady-love (Chaucer, 291).

The knight opens the curtains and finds his once old and ugly wife "young and lovely, rich in charms." He had been granted all he wanted simply by yielding to his wife. This idea is likely one which would have seemed a true fantasy to many, if not most, wives during Chaucer's time and a laughable joke to many husbands. Likely, some wives would have had similar fantasies of such yielding of their husbands, but would never have voiced them out loud or had the ability to act upon them. Chaucer's tale provided an outlet for such feelings and likely made him popular with his female readers, as well as male readers in for a "comedic" story.

At the very end of the Wife of Bath's tale she imparts a prayer of sorts which does not quite fit in with the given

surroundings on the pilgrimage:

May Christ Jesus send Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed, And grace to overbid them when we wed. And – Jesus hear my prayer! – cut short the lives of those who won't be governed by their wives; And all old, angry niggards of their pence, God send them soon a very pestilence (Chaucer, 292)!

The Wife's address to "us" seems out of place given the fact there are no other married women on the pilgrimage, nor any other woman able to marry given the fact they are all nuns. Thus the direct audience shifts from those on the journey to the readers of the tale, giving the feeling these ideas are not simply coming from the wife, but from Chaucer himself in hopes of opening the eyes of his readers to a more equal societal ideal.

The Wife is by no means a virgin. She makes this clear in her prologue and her very open admission of having five previous husbands, and on the hunt for a sixth. The way she speaks of marriage is almost in the same way one would speak of the past careers or jobs one has held. The Cambridge Companion states, "Although the Wife's Prologue may seem intimate because it concerns domestic life, all that she ever talks about is her profession – marriage. We hear nothing about weaving (her first vocation) and no details of the extramarital sexual encounters she hints at; other parts of her life, like her gossips or pilgrimages, are mentioned only when directly relevant to her husbands" (Benson, 135). As a professional wife, she seems to command her search and marriages as a job, demanding the respect a boss would. While at first it may seem she only wants to control her husbands in her many marriages, it becomes clear she is after true sovereignty in the form of respect. In her time, it may have been seen as ruling over a spouse, but given her tale which speaks extensively of gentillesse, the overall impression seems to be more of respect, which she urges all wives should seek and gain. It is important to remember the time period this was written and taking place. With such a harsh view on women and an understanding they needed to be dominated or ruled over, this would be the only way in which Alison would be able to turn the tables. Respect demanded sovereignty be given, regardless of how harsh it comes across. Thus, sovereignty must be gained before respect. The Wife successfully accomplishes this in each of her marriages and acts as a poster child for a far more equal, perhaps bordering on matriarchal society.

## 10. Counter Arguments

Some arguments to the idea that the Wife of Bath is not in fact a feminist, but in actuality an anti-feminist with a comedic twist have surrounded the idea that she is nothing more than a cruel harpy who uses sex to subdue men. Citations to the way in which she acts against her fifth husband have been used to prove this idea. However, in the Medieval Age, what other vices did a woman have to use? A man was brought up by society to believe women were to

be controlled, and a defiant woman needed discipline to be controlled. The California State University of Pomona website on Medieval and Renaissance Traditions states,

"St. Thomas of Aquinas, 1225-1274, who was perhaps one of the great teachers of the period declared what was clearly a widely supported notion regarding women: 'The woman is subject to man on account of the weakness of her nature . . . Man is the beginning of woman and her end, just as God is the beginning and end of every creature. Children ought to love their Father more than they love their mother.'"

The Wife, by the time she reaches husband number five, has found ways in which to gain her sovereignty and is by no means going to allow her husband to control her. He brings up tales to her from *The Book of Wicked Wives*, at which point she violently rips pages from causing her husband to strike her. She pretends to be dying and when he comes near to kiss her, she knocks him down. She later forces her husband to burn the book, showing her defiance against the traditional patriarchal ways of life. It is this action against the book that dispels the arguments that this textual woman is anything less a representation for the feminist ideals of Chaucer. This book represents the old and accepted view of women during this time while Chaucer drastically challenges it, all the while encouraging his female readers to do the same. Jane Chance extends the understandings of this incident by posing a question as to why Alison retells this "shocking incident to this audience of Canterbury pilgrims" (Chance 225). She answers by stating,

Perhaps she expects, through her selection of details, that the audience will recognize the clear misogyny of her clerical spouse and thus exonerate her from any blame of lechery, avarice, treachery, homicide. Or, as mythographer she may be using the wicked wives in her reconstruction of the incident to reveal his true motives: he was avaricious, lecherous, even homicidal, wanted money and, in striking her, determined to obtain it. If he had murdered once for money — as may have been the case with her fourth husband— he might well have done it again. And so he acted out her made-up "dream," of finding blood in her bed, once in fantasy, once in threatened reality. If he is still alive and still her husband, such a threat of a public "hue and cry" effectively functions as a deterrent to future violence and treachery and also labels him in advance as potential suspect should any foul play occur. But perhaps more appropriate still is the incident's existence as a "homily" in this preacher's repertoire of sermons. Her authority springs from the "wo that is in mariage" (3) and, like a friar who preaches, she educates the public in what she knows best. The tale of her "joly body" is itself a lesson and continues in the actual tale, of a wise woman who educates an ignorant pupil (Chance 225).

Why does the Wife of Bath choose to be this way? Or perhaps a more pointed question would be, why did Chaucer choose to write her like this? We can turn to a quote the wife states, "By God! If women had de-written

stories, As clerkeshan within ne hire oratories, They woldehanwriten of men moorewikkednesse Than al the mark of Adam may redresse (Chaucer, 285)." The article titled "The Wife of Bath and the Mediation of 'Privitee'" states, "In other words, women would write tropes in the same way and to the same end as men have done. But the word they thus usurp can only usurp in turn their womanhood. If women ex-appropriate words and things as men have done with their institutionalized tropes, they must suffer the painful and immediate consequence of coming to resemble men (University of Florida)." The Wife does exactly this by seeking power over men. By seeking the role of a man through drinking, arguing, and riding like a man forces a reverse of roles in her relationship, and one which Chaucer both plays with in a comedic way, as well as imparts some thought provoking ideas regarding a complete role reversal in society. He is giving men an idea of how things might look if the shoe was on the other foot with women being domineering. The article goes on to say, "And yet to justify herself and to found her identity, the Wife of Bath must resort to the works of man: at the extreme of this snarled predicament, she must plunder the literary works of men for arguments in defense of her position (University of Florida)." For the Wife, there simply was no other way for her to act or be to gain the respect and mastery over her husbands which she desired. In this time, for a man to understand the oppressive feelings and behavior women under went, a woman needed to take the role of the oppressing party. Once her husbands yielded was she then an equal party in the relationship, giving her husbands what they most desired: a loyal and loving wife.

It is interesting to note the Wife began her life of many marriages at the age of twelve and her tale begins with the rape of a young woman. Her tale reflects her own feelings so well, it might be assumed she, herself, was perhaps rapped as well through a forced marriage at such a young age. Her prologue is full of digressions concerning her experiences and life. This subject of rape and redemption through changes in understanding and heart is not only something near and dear to her heart, but obviously to Chaucer's as well. It would seem he understands the power that anger can produce, escalating into motivation and action as he places the Wife in a prime place for this.

## 11. "Invisibility" of Genders

There is one final point which Holly Crocker, author of Chaucer's Visions of Manhood brings to light dealing with what she calls the "invisibility" of genders (123). This concept deals with the idea that Chaucer has created mirrored characters which share personalities and situations, yet one is female while the other male. She further supports the idea that Chaucer was seeking to sneak into the minds of his readers the understanding of gender similarities and equality. Crocker states,

Because this textual crux unsettles the tale's gender perspective, I suggest it casts light on invisibility's

importance to formations of masculinity in two ways. The narrative multiplicity of the Shipman's Tale is revealing, first because it shows that Chaucer masters Alisoun of Bath's agency through a manipulation of her visibility. But examining the Shipman's Tale with one eye on the Wife of Bath also shows that a visible hierarchy of gender can be suspended through a collaborative performance of passing. Even if Chaucer never meant these tales to be confused, we see that textual indeterminacy allows for a more fluid relation between speakers and tales, husbands and wives, women and men (Crocker 123.)

The Wife of Bath has proven herself to be a character to be reckoned with throughout not only her own Prologue and Tale, but she also argues her way through most of the other character's time in the spot light. She rules conversations in the same way a man would and has to problem with voicing her opinion and expecting others to listen. The gender boundaries have been clearly suspended for the females at one point or another, but none as greatly as for Alison in particular. Why would Chaucer choose to only allow this suspension for one female character? Why not continue the "absurdity" for all the females in his work? The answer to this lies again in the subtle planting of the seed of feminism understandings. Had each female character been used in the same extreme fashion as Alison, the male readers likely would have closed his tales or chastised him for going too far with such tales. Having only one female character portrayed in such an extreme fashion ensured the continued reading of his Tales while still providing a clever veil in which to hide his political and social ideas. Considering the fact his Tales are still scrutinized to this day and his Wife is still touted as one of the most compelling and engaging characters in all of literature, it would be safe to assume Chaucer has succeeded in creating a literary marvel still relevant hundreds of years later.

## 12. Conclusion

There has never been a question about the intoxicating quality of the Wife of Bath. Chaucer has written this character with such believability and realism that it has been questioned by scholars and audience alike if the Wife of Bath was either actually a woman writing for Chaucer or based upon a real woman Chaucer actually knew. There have even been theories that she was not written by Chaucer at all, but written by a woman. She holds power over her readers with as much ease as she holds mastery over her husbands. Chaucer has achieved creating both an entertaining character while instilling ideas that were far beyond his time, and certainly unheard of in the Medieval Ages. The thoughts, feelings, and the experiences of women have not been blind to him, and the Wife of Bath has been a valuable tool by which to deliver some of the history of women's oppression. Chaucer no doubt had no vocabulary of feminism, but his ideas are purely feminist in their behavior and execution. By using The Wife of Bath to

convey them, he has achieved the effect of gaining a mass audience in which to deliver his message that women are just as capable as a man to act with sovereignty over their spouse. They are equally able to think and act on their own accord and deserve to be respected as equal human beings. Even the misconception that women are "weak" is challenged by the Wife in her ability to both mentally and physically protect herself. Her comedy, while some see as proof of her idiotic thinking, in fact helps to keep with the flow of comedy throughout Chaucer's tale. It would have been heretic to create a tale which was strictly serious in feminist ideas, but a comedic effect was needed if he ever hoped to gain a vast audience. Chaucer was far beyond his time, but still an original thinker with compassion towards the plight women of the Renaissance faced.

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