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Intro. To British Literature & Culture
October 2016

Geoffrey Chaucer and The Wife Of Bath's Prologue: A Feminist Analysis

Published in 1478, Geoffrey Chaucer's collection of short stories, *The Canterbury Tales*, shares the fictional narratives over twenty different distinct characters. Included in this large work is *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, a lively account shared through the voice of the Wife of Bath herself. Though often read as anti feminist rhetoric, textual evidence supports the interpretation of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a parody of anti feminist texts. Through Chaucer's use of hyperbolic stereotyping, the Wife of Bath is painted as a caricature of period relevant misogynistic anti feminist rhetoric.

Studied by literature enthusiasts and historians around the world, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* presents interesting insight into the role of women in the early fifteenth century. Though seemingly a first person narrative, it is important to note that the Wife of Bath is indeed a fictional character, and both the prologue and tale were written by Geoffrey Chaucer. The prologue, nearly twice as long as the tale itself, expertly characterizes the Wife of Bath. Along with identifying her physical characteristics, Chaucer's prologue provides readers with the Wife of Bath's personal history in order to recognize her as an "authority" on marriage, thus leading into the content of the main tale.

In this prologue, the wife of bath notes her extensive personal experience with marriage, announcing that she has been previously married five times. She mentions having faced harsh criticism for her history with men, arguing that much of her criticism has come from supporters of the Christian philosophy that women should only be married once. To Christians, the textual support for this claim is found in the Bible, as Christ himself only attended one wedding - the wedding at Cana. In this prologue, the Wife of Bath shares her own understanding of the Bible,

arguing that man can only guess Jesus' intentions in scripture, because Jesus is not alive to explain his intentions himself. She goes on to allude to biblical figures who were married and remarried, including the revered King Solomon. "Lo heere the wise kyng daun Salamon: I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon" (Chaucer 494, L. 35-36). She alludes to not only the King, but also Abraham and Jacob, two biblical figures, well-known for holding multiple wives. The Wife challenges the idea that God forbade multiple marriages, as her never challenged these holy men for doing so.

The Wife of Bath reads the bible as a call to engage in sexual activity, rather than refrain from it. She mentions that without sexually active women, man would not be able to procreate and create the "virgins" that the bible so highly reveres. In lines 115 through 162, the Wife of Bath talks about the purpose of male and female genitals. Though this selection could be read as a caricature of a woman's crude understanding of the reproductive organs and biblical heritage, it can also be read as an outwardly feminist declaration of sexuality and reclamation of the female body. The wife writes, "I sey this: that they [male and female genitals] makend ben for both; that is to seye, for office and for ese, or engendrure ther we nat God displese" (Chaucer 496, L. 126-128). In her discussion of the sex organs, the Wife of Bath notes that God would not have created sexual pleasure if he did not permit the exploration of sexual activity. She uses her interpretation of Christian ideology to support her decision making, writing, "I wol use myn instrument/As frely as my makere hath it sent" (Chaucer 496, L. 149-150). With this line, the Wife of Bath deems her sexual activity as both Christian and empowering.

In citing the bible and sharing her understanding of Christian theology, the Wife of Bath demonstrates two particularly feminist behaviors: commitment to her own independent beliefs and ideas, and academic learnedness. Clearly, the wife of bath is a layperson. Therefore, her

literacy and knowledge of the bible marks her as a well read, intelligent woman. Though the Wife of Bath can be read as a distinctively unabashed about her biblical interpretation, she clearly misquotes and misreads sections of the bible through her prologue. Chaucer paints her as both a learned woman who misinterprets that which she has read, further caricaturing her character as inferior due to her lack of understanding.

Throughout the prologue the Wife asserts her independent ideas, and never mentions relying on a male figure for assistance. She is outwardly free of ties to men, and even states that she is unabashedly aware and in agreement with some of the gossip men spread about her for being so free. In lines 371 to 378, the Wife of Bath addresses the comparisons men make between a woman's love and torture, writing, "Thou liknes eek wommenes love to helle, to bareyne long, ther water may nat dwelle, Thou likenet it also to a wilde fyr..." (Chaucer 500). Rather than refuting these claims, she admits to acting in a manipulative and deceitful way towards her previous husbands. "Lodynges, right thus, as ye have understonde" (Chaucer 500, L. 379). Chaucer writes the Wife of Bath as a woman who empowers herself using the traditionally negative female stereotypes - a woman who prides herself on her feminine ability and power through trickery and sexuality.

The description of the Wife of Bath can also be understood as feminist, as she is described as an autonomous businesswoman, fluid and powerful. She has taken part in many pilgrimages, and owns a high quality horse, comparable to that of the wealthy men that attend the same excursions. It is mentioned that she is deaf, due to an injury induced by a physically abusive husband. Regardless of her disability, the wife of bath carries on, running a cloth-making business. Her physical description is less easily understood as feminist, with her physiognomy described as red-faced with a gap between her teeth. She writes, "Gat-tothed I was, and that

bicam me weel; I hadde the prente of Sein Venus seel” (Chaucer 503, L. 603-604). In this line, the Wife of Bath asserts that her gap-toothedness suits her well, as women with gapped teeth are recognized as lustful. Again, the Wife of Bath empowers herself through her apparent sexuality, and uses this quality as a means of obtaining that which she desires. She is described as red-faced due to her love for consuming alcohol, another trait which is hyperbolically caricatured through the prologue.

In conclusion, Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* simultaneously paints the Wife of Bath as an empowered female character, along with a drunk, unintelligent, sexually promiscuous creature. Regardless of Chaucer’s intention in crafting the Wife of Bath this way, after close reading, it appears as though his intentions may fall short with a large body of readers. Though the prologue can be seen as an intentional parody of anti feminist rhetoric, the reading of the text could be anti feminist in itself. If Chaucer’s goal was to parody misogynistic ideals, he may have failed. The Wife of Bath could be read as either a strong women exhibiting agency, or a sloppy drunkard. Depending on the reader, the Wife of Bath could easily align with nasty feminine stereotypes. Should feminist critics choose to read the Wife of Bath as learned and sexually empowered, that reading defeats the purpose of Chaucer’s caricature. Should anti feminist readers choose to read the Wife of Bath as a “stereotypical woman,” the caricature and underlying meaning is entirely lost.

Referencces

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