

Unveiling Gender Dynamics: A Feminist Voice in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale"

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Abstract

This article scrutinises femininity and gender in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." Alyson, the Wife of Bath, is the central female character in the story, and through her, Chaucer depicts the life of a medieval woman, both typical in some ways and unexpected in others. She grapples with complex relationships with men, who consistently oppose her proto-feminist identity. Consequently, Alyson's existence is marked by the challenges of a woman's reality in a patriarchal society, subject to numerous forms of dominance. Her daily life is thus a continual battle against these societal forces. This study delves into this ongoing struggle and explores the dynamic between society and women as portrayed in this "Prologue" and "Tale." This article employs a feminist framework as set out in Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" to examine gender representation and language. Cixous encourages women to express themselves through writing or speaking in order to gain a deeper awareness of the world of women.

Keywords: *Canterbury Tales*; Chaucer; femininity; gender; "The Laugh of the Medusa"

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Introduction: Gender Dynamics and Patriarchal Oppression in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale"

Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry supplies vivid pictures of medieval life, which warrant closer study of the period from corroborating sources to deepen our knowledge of medieval narratives and their societal implications. The work also invites scholars to introduce innovative interpretations that enrich the field of medieval studies and also pave the way for new scholarly inquiries. *The Canterbury Tales*, with its diverse cast of characters, styles, and attitudes, is an ideal source for such research. Chaucer's female characters stand out as remarkable when they are analysed in the context of gender-specific storytelling. Since gender roles are shaped by the society in which one lives, it is crucial to research and explore the impact of being male or female across different historical periods, and the effect of gender on storytelling. This article therefore explores the Wife of Bath in line with Joan Scott's (1986, 1053) argument that gender is "a useful category of historical analysis."

The male-female gender dichotomy has been extensively discussed and analysed in respect of medieval society, which has associated women mainly with the domestic sphere. This association emerged from historical and societal developments, not merely from labelling. Anita Kay O'Pry-Reynolds (2013, 38) claims that in the early part of the Middle Ages, women "were symbols of purity, motherhood, beauty, kindness, love, conquest, and sexual desire." Women were supposed to raise their children while staying at home. Their social, political, psychological, and economic lives were therefore compromised. Against this background, Chaucer's presentation of men and women in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" highlights the complexities and tensions in gendered relationships. His presentation needs to be assessed against Katharina Wilson's (1985, 19) demonstration that in medieval literature, which was written mainly by male writers and clerics, women were frequently presented as "self-indulgent, lustful, treacherous, domineering, greedy, shrewish, prone to sin, and, most importantly, considered a danger to man's salvation." It is telling that "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" describes how some medieval women defied gender stereotypes and sought freedom from patriarchal forces of oppression, by rejecting conventional notions of elevated domestic womanhood and by enduring a sometimes harrowing journey of self-discovery and identity-building. Malek Zuraikat (2017, 2) indicates that Chaucer, in "The Wife of the Bath's Prologue and Tale" and some other tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, "believes that the man-women relationship becomes hostile when women resist patriarchy."

Stories narrated by women can manifest the specific aspirations of women who are dissatisfied with the practices and values that govern their social position. Ian McCormick (2016, 22), in a discussion about women's writing, notes that "writing offered opportunities to explore the injustice and cruelty endured by women, but it was also a space to imagine a different kind of society in which women's lives might be improved and men's dominant role(s) contested." "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and

Tale” does not represent women’s writing: even though the “Tale” is ostensibly told by the Wife of Bath, the actual author (Chaucer) is not female. In this regard, Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1992, 29) cautions that readers should remember that the Wife is a fictional creation of male sexist rhetoric rather than a real person, “a dramatic and essential instance of women’s silence and suppression.” It can thus be argued that Chaucer portrays Alyson, the Wife of Bath, in a negative manner, making her one of the most prominent early antifeminist characters. Meyer Howard Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (2000, 253) point out that “in creating the Wife of Bath, Chaucer drew upon a centuries-old tradition of antifeminist writings that was particularly nurtured by the medieval Church.”

In the “Prologue,” the Wife of Bath presents herself as highly experienced in the matters of sex and marriage. As she has been married five times and is ready for another husband, Alyson defends women who have married more than once. She sees marriage as a positive experience and says she never wanted to stay a virgin, one of the archetypes of ideal femininity that medieval culture and the Church taught her at the time.

Speaking more broadly, Vaněčková (2007, 4) states that “Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* portrays the feminine ideals of the Middle Ages.” It has been suggested that “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” provides a snapshot of women’s roles and status in the medieval period, potentially reflecting Chaucer’s own views on women. Sheila Delaney (1975, 104) makes the case that Chaucer’s Wife is a victim of “sexual economics” and that readers should interpret “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” as a lesson on the ways in which female spouses were constrained by marital law. However, Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (1989) suggests that the Wife of Bath exemplifies feminist principles by challenging patriarchal structures and asserting the importance of feminine desire.

Retha Knoetze (2015), in her article discussing “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” examines marriage and domestic life in the Late Middle Ages. She makes a case against the criticism levelled against the Wife of Bath that holds that the character is a product of misogynistic stereotypes and was not taken seriously by medieval audiences. Knoetze (2015) argues that the Wife’s “Tale” could have been taken seriously as a defence of women by a medieval audience. Her views on mutuality and participation in marriage are shown in the article to be consistent with the social mores and discourses of the time, reflecting the changing status of women in England in the fourteenth century.

Mei-Ling Chao (2007, 84) maintains that “in her prologue, the Wife of Bath represents herself as an earthy woman driven by a combination of economic necessity, pride, impulse, and animal instinct.” In her discussion about problems of mastery, Patricia Magee (1971, 49) indicates that the Wife of Bath “desires most whatever is denied to her ... [H]er happy marriage is to the husband that dominated her ... [S]he was searching for a winning promise of servitude.” If this argument holds, it shows that the Wife of Bath looks for a kind of subordination or submission in her marriages that she

believes will be helpful or advantageous for her. It suggests that she wants a dynamic in the relationship in which she may be assertive and in charge, while still being obedient to society's expectations of a wife. In essence, she is looking for the middle ground where she can maintain some agency and authority, while still being part of a conventional patriarchal system. This also emphasises the complexity of the Wife's desires, since it shows how she navigates her autonomy and authority within the confines of medieval marriage conventions.

According to Benjamin Moore (1989, 41), many of the tellers of *The Canterbury Tales* "concern themselves in one way or another with questions of doctrine—that is, ideology." Moore draws attention to the wide variety of moral, theological, and philosophical viewpoints that are present throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. Each story serves as a means of examining and analysing the various ideological stances that were common in medieval society via the lens of its narrative and characters. He also shows how Chaucer prompts readers to ponder the complexities of morality, power dynamics, and belief systems in medieval society by exploring the interactions among the pilgrims about the tales they share. Consequently, the text transcends mere literary competence, emerging as a profound exploration of the connections between ideology, literature, and human existence.

The inclusion of the opinions of the critics mentioned above highlights the variety of ways in which Chaucer's portrayal of women, especially in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," has been interpreted. These differing perspectives enhance the conversation about the feminist implications of Chaucer's writings by adding to the continuing scholarly debate about the complex dynamics of gender throughout the medieval period and how women are portrayed in the literature of the time. The aim of contrasting these many readings is to provide readers with a thorough grasp of the variety of perspectives and to stimulate critical interaction with the text. The ultimate objective is to investigate the ways in which gender, power relations, and agency are discussed in relation to Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath in feminist discourse and medieval literature.

It is evident from analysing Chaucer's presentation of the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*, mainly when considered through the many critical interpretations, that her character serves as a complex representation of the issues of gender, power, and agency in medieval society. This article engages some of the various ways in which critics have interpreted feminist discourse on Chaucer's gender engagement and the ways in which his work supports or challenges traditional gender norms. These perspectives range from seeing the Wife of Bath as a victim of patriarchal oppression to seeing her as a skilful debater on the issues of marriage. Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath as a key character to explore the ways in which gender, desire, and societal expectations intersect, challenging readers to re-evaluate their perceptions of the roles and lives of women. Specifically, this article employs a feminist framework as set out in Hélène

Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" to examine gender representation and language.

Chaucer's Realism and Feminist Discourse: Satire and Gender in Medieval Literature

Although much of medieval literature is idealistic rather than realistic (Burrow 1980), Chaucer has been characterised as realistic in depicting the religious or chivalric ideals of life (Burrow 1980). His characters interact in ways that mirror the complexities and flaws of the actual human experience, drawing from a variety of social classes and professions. Alexander C. H. Tung (n.d.) states that a good deal of medieval literary production "reflects clearly the realistic or practical aspects of life." He also believes that "most medieval literature is markedly tinged with the colour of Christianity, that of chivalry, or those of both." The Middle Ages were a humanist era, despite the dominance of Christianity and chivalry during that period (Nolan 1982), making Chaucer's significant role in introducing a more realistic approach in medieval literature particularly interesting.

Satire is a powerful device that enables Chaucer to point out the shortcomings of characters and the social issues resulting from these shortcomings. Michael Alexander (2000, 44) notes that "[m]edieval satirists reproved obstinate vice, but the pilgrim Chaucer praises his creatures, letting us see the imperfections to which they are blind." Accordingly, satire allows Chaucer to remain detached, which explains why he never obviously declares that the Church and English society are corrupt; he does not need to. His point is demonstrated by the characters themselves. Chaucer bases his character development on a thorough knowledge of the real-life parallels of his characters. As a result, *The Canterbury Tales* might be seen as a social, political, and economic reflection of fourteenth-century London.

Women and their identities in the Middle Ages were subjected to double standards in society and they faced several barriers. Women were largely considered the property of their husbands. Formal schooling was not required for a woman because her fate had already been determined, which was to be a housewife who would spend her life satisfying her husband, among other things. Women's access to higher education during the medieval era was mainly informal and constrained. Only a small fraction of women started attending universities, according to scholarly studies (Power 1975). But women still had to do whatever their lord or spouse wished. "Women were expected to be obedient to their husbands and lords, fulfilling roles that were defined by the expectations and needs of the men who held power over them" (Ward 2002, 67). This assertion is bolstered by more comprehensive historical investigations that demonstrate women's education was frequently limited to religious teaching or household skills, with major obstacles impeding their access to higher education (Bennett 1996; Shahar 2003). These limitations are a reflection of the larger early medieval patriarchal systems that required women to submit to the preferences of their male counterparts, thus

maintaining their submissive status (Riché 1978), although Alyson, the Wife of Bath, does seem to have some economic power, which would require greater skills.

The lasting impact of these historical restrictions on women can be seen in literary and cultural portrayals, which feminist thinkers such as Hélène Cixous aim to challenge. This study therefore investigates gender representations from a feminist point of view. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous (1976) represents Medusa as a revolutionary figure to change the stereotype imposed on women. Medusa is depicted as an ugly woman. Medusa is used as a tool to reject the stereotype that only the beautiful virgin woman is adored by society; her laugh is a form of rebellion against men's tyranny. Cixous considers Medusa in the myth of Medusa to be alive; she is still beautiful in her own way, and laughs at men who try to attack her. Cixous (1976, 885) declares that "all what women have to do to change history is to stop obeying men. They have to look at Medusa. She is beautiful, and she is laughing." The female audience of Medusa feels strong, powerful, and beautiful, exactly like her, which makes them stop listening to the past, and grasp the power and courage to change history. For Cixous, a woman should write or speak for herself. To break the old traditions, she should trace her body with a feminine language. By returning to her body to feel comfortable, the woman will bring back her pleasure, which was bound, and set herself free from guilt.

Challenging Medieval Gender Norms: The Wife of Bath's Struggle for Legitimacy

Some scholars argue that "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" is an embodiment of the female struggle for legitimacy and recognition, or at least that Chaucer was aware of this struggle. Chaucer is among the medieval writers who portrayed women who defied the gender norms of the time, refused to conform to conventional notions of elevated, domestic womanhood, and pursued a difficult journey of self-awareness and identity against the kinds of restriction placed on women by society and which affect the Wife of Bath. Throughout history, women have faced sexual exploitation and repression due to their relegation to domestic work, legal dependency on men, and other societal constraints. In a patriarchal culture, women are also seen as objects of sexual desire. However, as Kate Millett notes in *Sexual Politics* (1970, 119), women are not often encouraged to embrace their own sexuality freely. Instead, they are often subjected to pain and shame regarding their sexual orientation.

In a world characterised by widespread subordination of women and a strong emphasis on domestic ideology, Chaucer portrays the character of the Wife of Bath as rejecting the traditional medieval perceptions of women. Chaucer depicts the restraints of social traditions and exposes conventional gender differences and limits. He portrays the Wife of Bath as dealing with problems and offering both upbeat and downbeat answers, asserting her autonomy both within and outside the household. She rejects the notion of self-sacrifice and instead advocates for self-preservation by positioning herself in the least vulnerable position. This approach involves learning from experiences rather than

denying or submitting to them. Additionally, she expresses a desire for self-improvement, distinguishing herself from other women of her age.

Cixous (1976, 875) asserts: “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and history—by her own movement.” She does not deny that women are still affected by history, but she refuses to repeat that history. In her essay, she encourages women to look through their own lenses and from their own viewpoints: “You see? No? Wait, you’ll have everything explained to you, and you’ll know at least which sort of neurosis you’re related to. Hold still; we’re going to do your portrait so that you can begin looking like it right away” (Cixous 1976, 892). She argues that women should decide for their future; women have to analyse their knowledge from the past and choose the most suitable way for themselves.

It is noticeable that the Wife of Bath asserts that her narrative is drawn from personal experience, suggesting that her understanding of her life, position, and even Scripture are influenced by her life’s lessons:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynough for me! (Chaucer [1386] 2000, lines 1–2)

Her distinct approach to reading Scripture involves uncovering meanings in the text that are often overlooked, reflecting her unique perspective shaped by her own encounters and struggles. Her views are consistent with the broader teaching of the Church that celibacy is advocated for the clergy. However, within marriage, the Wife of Bath maintains that sexual pleasure is virtuous, aligning with the perspective that sexual relations are permissible for procreation and the glorification of God.

Alyson strongly rejects the idea that wives must constantly follow their husbands. In “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” she addresses the issues that women face in a medieval marriage, as well as the ways in which the customs of that era may be repurposed to strengthen the status of women. She is aware that power is not allocated evenly in most marriages, resulting in either the man’s or woman’s control over the other. The Wife of Bath begins the “Prologue” by claiming knowledge, which, according to her, she attains through experience in marriage. She does not, however, question the medieval period’s traditional link between marriage and sexuality. Alyson is a confident woman who lives for control and liberation, especially with her first four husbands. She is powerful because of her beauty and youth, which she uses to entrap potential elderly husbands, and accordingly, she can lead them.

The discussion over what makes a happy marriage, which is a subject that many of the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* ask about throughout their stories, centres on sexual desire and courtly love. When it comes to what makes a marriage successful and long-lasting, male and female roles are considered. In the medieval period, society expected men to be dominant. Stoss (2013, 1), referring to the thirteenth-century Castilian *Chronicle of Alfonso X*, explains that “men were expected to exude dominance in order

to be considered masculine in terms of women, war, and authority.” This was the conventional image of relationships at that time. However, Cixous urges women to learn to speak. This act does not only recognise the relationship of women to their sexuality, which gives them connection to their native strength, but it also grants them pleasures which have been hidden and frees them from the stereotype that has been imposed on them as guilty of everything (Cixous 1976, 880). In “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” Chaucer gives a voice to a female figure who defies patriarchal standards and articulates her own experiences and aspirations, so this text can be used to contextualise Cixous’s idea in respect of medieval literature and Chaucer’s works. By being outspoken about her sexuality and existence, Alyson, the Wife of Bath, epitomises what Cixous demands, and challenges the medieval stereotype of women as meek and silent. Chaucer thus anticipates Cixous’s support of women’s voices and agency, using Alyson to show the strength and complexity of a woman who takes ownership of her story.

Yet, the character of the Wife of Bath does not completely fulfil Cixous’s image. Alyson and her first four husbands do not appear to have a particularly strong, functioning, or family-like connection. She is the one who rules, the one who takes on the masculine dominant role, and she is the one who is in charge. Typically, men rule and have control in the marital home, but Alyson’s first four spouses are all weak men, and she appears to dominate. It seems that her relationship with her fifth husband is different because it is based on love, rather than on Alyson’s economic exploitation of her husbands. He is a clerk named Jankyn and is 20 years younger than she. She marries him for his beauty and charms rather than his money, as she did with her previous husbands. The Wife of Bath lustfully watches him at the funeral of her fourth husband. Though he is the cruellest to her, he is the one she loves most:

But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,
 And therwithal so wel coude he me glose
 Whan that he wolde han my bele chose,
 That though he hadde me bet on every boon,
 He coude winne again my love anon. (Chaucer [1386] 2000, lines 514–518)

Lucy Frost (1994, 69) indicates that even in the nineteenth century, “brutality in men is again breeding sensitivity and lovingness in women,” as shown in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. This contentious claim implies a relationship in which women respond to male aggression with caring or love. Interestingly, this is seen in the way Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*’ Wife of Bath portrays her marriage to her fifth husband, Jankyn, within the framework of medieval literature and culture, construing his violent behaviour towards her as a show of masculine strength that differentiates him from her first four husbands, whom she could manipulate. The Wife of Bath shows her intense love for Jankyn in spite of his brutality, underscoring a complicated and unsettling element of their relationship. It is crucial to understand that this is a reflection of personal attitudes rather than a universal reality. The idea that violence can or should promote love is firmly rejected by our contemporary views on gender dynamics and relationships. Modern perspectives support wholesome, civil partnerships built on

equality and reciprocity. Frost's assertion and its applicability to the medieval setting demonstrate how narratives can be influenced by historical perspectives on gender and power. But it is important to approach these concepts critically, acknowledging their historical specificity and rejecting damaging dynamics in modern settings.

In contrast to romanticised courtly love, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" illustrates that sexual desire played an essential role in medieval society. Both concentrate on carnal lust and sexual rivalry. The Wife of Bath speaks openly about her relationships with her husbands. According to her, she is able to influence her five husbands through her sexual and verbal abilities. In this regard, it is relevant that Cixous (1976, 880) portrays a woman as a text of multiple pleasures, saying, "Write yourself. Your body must be heard." She mentions sexual pleasures and adds that feminine sexuality has been repressed in conjunction with feminine writing as an expression of women's social or political existence.

Chaucer allows the Wife of Bath to make a serious attempt to discover herself away from ready-made and inherited patterns of women by breaking into the world of language and narrative as a device most capable of absorbing women's concerns and expressing her subjective and objective preoccupations. She tells a story that suits her ambitions and her broad horizons. Through the tale she tells the other pilgrims, she tries to provide herself with the opportunity to stand on her own as an entity with a special vision of the world. Alyson strives to prove the distinct identity that desires to be freed from all forms of alienation and oppression to the extent that she does not live by herself or for herself. She refuses to live by the will of the man. In fact, she rejects belonging to her husband, whether she is looking with his eyes or hearing with his ears. Nevertheless, despite all this and her attempt to portray a different and non-stereotypical image of women in the Middle Ages, she falls into the trap of patriarchal values. Arguably, she probably unintentionally uses the same masculine stereotypes of women to create a unique and rebellious personality in order to control others.

In the dominant masculine mentality, the woman constituted a weak being who could not protect herself. Jeanne L. Schroeder (1990, 1891) indicates that "in patriarchal societies, men as subjects define women as objects as a means of self-definition." Consequently, the Wife of Bath is pushed to the dark side by the dominance of values, beliefs, ideas, and biased authorities that deal with women in relation to their bodies and as objects of pleasure. In fact, it seems that Chaucer, through the portrayal of the character of the Wife of Bath, worked to violate the standards and laws that govern society, bypassing its limits in order to break some of the taboos that had been exhausted by reality and to allow his heroine to transgress the reality that threatens her entity and her existence. According to Alexander (2000, 45), "there is no steady moral viewpoint" in *The Canterbury Tales*; the details of "The General Prologue" "do not lead to social realism." This observation challenges the idea of social realism, which frequently entails a portrayal of society with an underlying moral critique or commentary, since it suggests that while "The General Prologue" gives vivid and detailed descriptions of its

characters, it does not commit to a consistent moral perspective. Thus, Chaucer opens the door to allow taboos to come to the surface in order to liberate women from the limits employed by the mentality of men and the history of the oppressive patriarchal culture that sees women only as a body and does not believe in them as a spirit or creative force.

The conflict between the Wife of Bath and her husband, Jankyn, illustrates the perceived inferiority of women in the eyes of men, which also constitutes a severe problem in the eyes of the author, who reveals to us the dreadful reality of a woman who struggles with the “other” due to his cruel nature, which allows patriarchal thoughts to assume a position of authority over the body of the woman. The Wife of Bath defends her rights in five marriages by sometimes wrongly quoting and interpreting Scripture according to what she thinks. She claims her right to be looked upon as equal to King Solomon and other biblical figures who married more than once. The Wife of Bath claims that her understanding of the Bible and her own marriage experiences give her the right to question societal norms that affect gender, as she makes clear in these lines:

Diverse scoles maken parfit clerkes
And diverse practikes in sondry werkes
Maken the werkman parfit sikerly:
Of five housbondes scoleyng am I. (Chaucer [1386] 2000, lines 47–50)

“Diverse scoles” here refers to many schools of thought or educational backgrounds that help a scholar become knowledgeable. Similarly, “diverse practikes in sondry werkes” refers to a variety of techniques used in various kinds of work that develop a craftsman’s expertise. The Wife of Bath suggests that her vast marriage experience qualifies her as an authority on the issue by drawing comparisons between her five husbands and various forms of education. She can confidently argue against cultural and societal standards about gender roles and expectations because of this similarity.

Repression, Power, and Patriarchy: The Complex Character of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath

Chaucer’s examination of repression in the Wife of Bath’s character is symptomatic of the general scrutiny of gender codes in the prologue to her “Tale.” The Wife of Bath is bold enough to talk in public about sex and her desires, and she rejects the need for masculine protection throughout her many marriages. This justifies her desire to wed for a sixth time and her attraction to her fifth husband, who is cruel to her and is not as weak as the first four. Therefore, the Wife of Bath’s suppression of her emotions can be seen as a response to patriarchal authority, highlighting how societal pressures force her to conceal her true feelings. John Kucich (1987, 203) indicates that as late as the Victorian era, “passion and repression frequently become interchangeable or reversible signs within a far more complicated conception of human desire that does not respect the obvious dichotomies—self-expression versus self-suppression; nature versus

culture; vitality versus inhibition—that we conventionally assign to them.” What makes the Wife of Bath different is how bravely she handles her repressed thoughts.

She treats most of her husbands with contempt, manipulating them and using her beauty and body for that purpose. She attracts them to her sexually. Her sexual superiority generates in them a sense of powerlessness, which justifies why they are subjected to and drawn to her. There is a price to pay, however. Writing about the silent crisis of the American woman in modern short stories, but perhaps equally relevant to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, Al-Abdulrazaq (2017, 30) indicates that “men who do not stir passionate feelings greatly contribute to women’s suffering from depression and anxiety.” This suggests that women in unfulfilling relationships may experience heightened anxiety due to a lack of emotional connection and satisfaction, which can exacerbate feelings of unease and contribute to overall mental health issues.

In the eyes of medieval society, women were seen as the descendants of Eve’s sin. They were blamed for tempting men. Richards (1990, 25) states that in the Middle Ages, women were often seen as the “source of the original sin and an instrument of the devil.” Chaucer makes the Wife of Bath depict herself as tempting and lustful, and hence as corrupt. She does not conform to the stereotype of the ideal medieval lady, who is expected to care for others and be a good wife or mother. Driven by her craving for sexual gratification, the Wife of Bath eventually faces punishment when her fifth husband, Jankyn, beats her, leaving her deaf in one ear. This physical ailment represents the wider social repercussions that confront women who defy patriarchal standards. Her punishment acts as a narrative device to highlight the consequences for women who stand up to male authority and assert their autonomy in the setting of medieval society, where men held most of the power. Rather than being an isolated act of violence, this beating illustrates how gender inequalities are enforced systemically, penalising women who try to compete in a society controlled by men for their disobedience. Chaucer exposes the difficulties faced by women in their quest for equality and freedom while also criticising the harsh reality of patriarchal domination with this portrayal. It can be noticed that the character of the Wife of the Bath is angered by the images of unfaithful women of history and legend which are mentioned in Jankyn’s book, and with which he taunts her. She is upset about Jankyn spending his time reading that book. He reads the stories aloud, which irritates her. Out of rage, the Wife of Bath rips three pages from the book and hits him in the face. He retaliates by striking her across the face so hard that it damages her hearing. In self-defence, she plays dead to make him feel bad, giving herself permission to do everything she wants. This episode seems to illustrate the conflict between repression and emotion.

Possibly because she thinks he is implying something about her, the Wife of Bath does not want her husband to read about evil women. Jankyn’s book, which is sometimes called the “Book of Wicked Wives,” is an assortment of sexist writings that portray women as naturally wicked and dishonest. These writings include works by authors such as Tertullian and Jerome. One well-known work that is part of this collection is that by

the fourth-century monk Jovinian, whose writings frequently denigrated women and questioned the idea of female virtue. The Wife of Bath finds it especially annoying that Jankyn reads and quotes from this book so frequently, because she believes it perpetuates negative preconceptions about women and is an attempt to control her. Although Jankyn is the husband she loves most, he is not the best model for a husband. He is just like other men who think women are wicked and unfaithful.

To be a mother and to have a child, as Cixous asserts, is a woman's choice. She declares that it is a woman's business to decide whether she wants a child or not. No one should threaten her, especially when it comes to satisfying her desire. She criticizes men: "And man, are you still going to bank on everyone's blindness and passivity, afraid lest the child make a father and, consequently, that in having a child, the woman lands herself more than one bad deal by engendering all at once child-mother-father-family?" (Cixous 1976, 890). She adds that it is up to the woman to break the stereotype that imposes the idea that a good father is a dead one or "the child is the death of his parents" (Cixous 1976, 890). This is connected to the Wife of Bath's larger fight against cultural expectations that limit the potential and duties of women. She connects her personal story with a broader feminist discourse by stating that women need to actively demolish damaging preconceptions. This shows her opposition to patriarchal expectations and her desire for women to claim their own identities and agency.

Cixous (1976) claims that being a mother adds some behaviours women should follow throughout a marriage. She gives pleasure to her husband, looks after the children, and feeds them. The Wife of Bath is unlike the ideal medieval woman, who is supposed to be a caregiver and a good wife or mother. She has been married five times and has never had a child, for an unspecified reason (arguably, her first three husbands were impotent due to their advanced age). Rebellious women do not desire to be mothers and actively reject that role. This illustrates the difference between the nurturing instinct typically associated with women and the primal sexual desires often attributed to men. It is likely that she aims to express her opposition to medieval beliefs that portray women as mentally and physically inferior to men, reducing them to mere child-bearing entities. Establishing a family may be very important for an individual's well-being and central to stability, according to her society, but the Wife of Bath favours sexual pleasure and her desires over maternal obligations. Mental and physical integrity may arise from the values, emotional bonds, and joys of family life. For those living in the Middle Ages, a woman's conduct, attitude, and desires could be correctly tracked and controlled by her mother. Thus, Alyson swims against the tide, disregarding medieval patriarchal conventions.

The development of the Wife of Bath's character illustrates the views of medieval patriarchal ideology. Laskaya (1995, 184) argues, "If the Wife of Bath's prologue is a challenge to the authority of human perception, particularly men's perceptions, it also reveals the power of patriarchal ideology to impede perception." By highlighting the ways in which the Wife of Bath defies gender norms, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and

Tale” perpetuates patriarchal ideology. This may make readers think that Chaucer seems to agree, to a certain extent, with medieval thoughts about gender roles. However, he tries to speak from a feminist perspective, and he is probably still unsatisfied with the way medieval society views women as an erotic object. Laskaya (1995, 166) adds: “There are several tales in which Chaucer attempts to move closer to a female perspective.” His message may be that, in order for women to lead happy lives, they must be moral, upright, loving, and compassionate. It is believed that women’s adherence to patriarchal gender norms is necessary for the stability of the family. Yet, women still need to be looked upon as central to the development of medieval men’s expectations. Men, blinded by the sexual power of women, may fail to recognise women’s innate personal qualities.

Unveiling Desire: The Complex Interplay of Sex and Power in Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”

“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” poses the issue of sex as a confusing problem that leads to an unbalanced and severe relationship between the woman and the other. Chaucer suggests that sex is the essence of the relationship between the woman and the man if it is based on private and emotional foundations that constitute a physical erotic relationship. The woman is supposedly always looking for someone who makes her feel loved and safe, and this is what Alyson does not find in her relationship with her first four husbands, who enjoyed her body without exchanging any emotional contact. Sex is one of the complex and thorny literary subjects that has sparked wide controversy and deep disagreement throughout the history of world literature. It cannot be ignored because it is one of the main motives driving human behaviour. At the same time, it was not possible to deal with it without social, historical, and psychological sensitivities ranging between freedom and absolute prohibition according to the level of the culture and the spirit of the age. In the prologue to her tale, the Wife of Bath defends sexual pleasure in a society that views sex as a sin. Lipton (2017, 2) points out that “even within marriage, preachers taught that sexual pleasure was ‘lust’ and considered sinful.”

The Wife of Bath overcomes the issue of a woman’s fear of unveiling her innermost secrets, because revealing them is forbidden in a society that shackles women and thrusts them into many psychological complexes concerning the female body, which she should be ashamed of and not talk about. The lack of respect and contempt for women is what makes them resort to anti-patriarchal solutions, which have always given women a negative image in the eyes of the man. He is the winner in this relationship, and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” proves this. In “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” King Arthur sentences a knight to death for rape. But Queen Guinevere and her ladies intervene, giving him a chance to escape with his life provided he can figure out what women want in a year. Following a futile quest, the knight comes upon an elderly woman who, in exchange for marriage, will provide the solution. He concurs, but calls her desperate, and she informs him that a woman generally aspires to be in charge of her own life. The queen is pleased with this response, and the knight’s life is saved. He reluctantly gets

married to the elderly woman, who gives him an option: either she stays old and faithful, or she gets younger and more attractive, but might be unfaithful. Having learnt the lesson, he gives her the freedom to choose. She rewards him for giving her freedom of choice by becoming a young, attractive, and devoted wife.

This story emphasises the difficulties of navigating gender roles as well as the fallout from male supremacy. The knight's eventual reward highlights the problematic relationships of power and justice, in spite of his initial transgression. The knight's choice to let his wife pick her own shape implies a critique of social conventions in which male offenses are ignored or pardoned as long as they eventually yield to feminine power. Because Chaucer explores gender and power in medieval society in such a subtle way, this denouement further confuses the moral compass of the story. Therefore, the Wife of Bath's position is daring and unusual in presenting a sensitive social issue with a clear vision, far from fear and confusion.

The Wife of Bath is in some ways depicted as a shallow individual who desires men just for sex and money.

God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;

That gentil text can I wel understonde (Chaucer [1386] 2000, lines 28–29)

She interprets the biblical text according to her wishes. She believes that the financial benefits of marriage come from land and inheritance upon the passing of one's spouse, rather than from having children. The Wife of Bath chooses to interpret the meaning of the text by explaining that she does not care about procreation as a way to show fruitfulness, but developing her financial stability is her perfect way to prove success.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" serves as evidence of Alyson's viewpoint on women's power. The story also suggests that not only Alyson but all women throughout history like to rule males. The story is an illustration of Alyson's concept of happy marriages in action. In fact, it seems that the tale presents surprising behaviour by the queen and the other ladies who decide to help the young knight and save his life despite his action of raping another woman. It would be more reasonable for women to defend themselves and other women against men rather than the opposite. This may make people think that the pain of the woman who was raped by the knight is not recognised by the queen and the other ladies. According to Cixous (1976, 878),

men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously and violently, they have led them to hate themselves, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, and to be the executors of their virile needs. They have made for women an anti-narcissism! A narcissism that loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of anti-love.

She claims that men believe that women are jealous of each other and do not deserve to come to the level of men; therefore, it is not surprising that some women think it can be

advantageous to support males against helpless women. Although rape usually turns a male character into a villain, the young knight is rewarded at the end of the tale with a beautiful and faithful wife.

Chaucer was a keen observer of the medieval society in which he lived. He cleverly employs commentary and criticism of society with a creative and sometimes ambiguous style that leads to different interpretations. Considering the situation from a different perspective, the intervention of the queen and other ladies can be seen as a punishment for the knight by putting him at their mercy: he needs to develop the ability to think like a woman, a punishment that is appropriate to the crime.

It seems that Alyson tries to benefit from all the details of her tale that help prove her philosophy. She shows that the queen also dominates the king. Upon her request, King Arthur gives the queen authority over the knight to punish him. Possibly, this explains why Chaucer does not seem to pass judgement on women who defy medieval patriarchal traditions but instead remarks on them as a detached observer.

The sovereignty that the old hag seeks in the tale is different from the one that the Wife of Bath pursues. It seems that what the old woman seeks is equality rather than dominance. Thus, probably what the Wife apparently points to in the tale is that if a woman is given some control in marriage, the end outcome is equality rather than the abolition of patriarchy. A woman might be dependable and devoted to her spouse when she is free and not forced into submission.

Conclusion

The act of writing and speaking for women is crucial. When a woman expresses herself from her point of view, as Cixous (1976) argues, she will not only force men to re-evaluate their position on women, but they will also place women in power. Throughout history, women have been silenced. According to Cixous, the only way the woman can change this history is to speak and write herself into it. Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" aims to create equality for both genders and liberate women from the stereotype that was imposed on them.

This article's examination leads to the conclusion that Chaucer's literary ideas about women and femininity not only vividly capture the gender crises of the Middle Ages but also provide a fascinating insight into the changing social dynamics of his day. By endorsing a model of feminine identity, he implicitly aims to modify socially accepted standards of femininity, but "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" still refuses to depict a process by which men might choose to establish a masculine identity that permits women to take on a more socially active role, allowing feminine desire to be fulfilled. This shift in gender roles necessitates the emergence of a new woman capable of entering an equal-partnership marriage. It also necessitates the growth of a new man capable of responding to women's demands for egalitarianism and reciprocal respect. The underlying message of Chaucer's work is to establish a world in which both sexes

must coexist in order to function, and men and women enable each other to advance. Male loss of control is connected to a man's feeling of masculinity. Creative writing's depiction of loss of control exposes and examines some concerns, uncertainties, and dangers associated with gaining and sustaining masculinity in a patriarchal society.

It can be said that Chaucer portrays men living a life that is characterised by emotional alienation. Men typically think of women as inferior and untrustworthy, but Chaucer points out that some men are also unreliable. This contrast casts doubt on oversimplified ideas about gender dynamics and emphasises a more complex view of human behaviour. The Wife of Bath's five husbands fail to provide her with affection and love, but if she had experienced those, she could have avoided the accusations and criticism she received. Chaucer demonstrates that just like females, men may be thoughtful, humble, and sensible, or they can be impetuous, haughty, and irrational.

The analysis unfolds the Wife of Bath's dilemma towards self-development and self-control. She feels proud of her beauty, her experience, and herself. She still does not think that proper education is necessary for her to feel good about herself. She draws attention with her beauty and dress, yet she does not perceive her own flaws; she is unable to live up (or down) to the expectations of her society. It is clear from this that the Wife of Bath's desire for pleasure drives her to suppress her guilt and disregard outside pressures, resulting in a disconnect between her mental and physical needs. What worries her is that she wants to experience life to the fullest.

If the previous analysis tells us something, it tells us that the boundaries between the voice of Chaucer, the author or pilgrim, and the voice of the Wife of Bath are undeniably blurred and complex. Looking at the effect that the author's or narrator's gender might have on how a story gets told is very important. Hansen (1992, 12) indicates that "what often sounds like a woman's voice, what is spoken in the name of women ... always enters and leaves the Chaucerian story as the enunciation of an autonomous speaker, but as an urgent problem for the gendered identity of male characters, male narrators, and male readers." Different questions come to the mind of readers once they examine in depth the attitudes towards gender issues presented in the story. Chaucer is a skilled observer and satirist, as has already been mentioned. However, he probably amusingly uses the Wife of Bath to reflect on his own thoughts and his society's perceptions of masculinity and femininity. He can be sympathetic to the Wife of Bath, and is probably trying to promote women who reject the norms of their society for the sake of their own desires and needs. Chaucer might have intended to present the Wife of Bath as a genuine victim of the ideals of society. He also might have intended to reinforce patriarchal ideology by the way in which he portrays the Wife of Bath's inability to stick to traditional gender roles. This is why he never discusses the significant and powerful influence that femininity may play in the stability and organic development of men. Had the narrator or the author been female, she might have described the Wife of Bath differently. Chaucer himself admits that, and puts this acknowledgement into the mouth

of his heroine, whose husband, Jankyn, likes reading misogynistic tales in his book on wicked wives:

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han with-inne hir oratories,
They wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse. (Chaucer [1386] 2000, lines 699–703)

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