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Chaucer: An Anti-Feminist Writer Offering Pro-Feminist Rhetoric

In Chaucer's time, medieval society revolved around the great chain of being. This hierarchal system built upon Christian beliefs centers around a dichotomy where women have no secure place. This system regards women with hostility and works in favor of men. In *The Canterbury Tales*, found in Larry D. Benson's third edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*, Chaucer approaches women's displeasure in this suppressing society. Focusing on *The Wife of Bath's tale*, Chaucer explores what women want in society, and how reality falls short of these aspirations. For women, their placement and treatment in medieval society remains their reality. This paper does not argue Chaucer's motivations or intentions in this text. Examining his works from the modern perspective, his intentions behind his literature and social commentary remains ambiguous. However, by offering a narrative from a woman's point of view, he participates in late 14th century feminist conversation surrounding women's thoughts and placement in medieval society. While the Wife as a character represents tropes of antifeminist rhetoric, the tale she narrates provides a number of images that showcases women's dissatisfaction with medieval social arrangements. The Wife's tale gives evidence that supports women's agency that counteracts traditional discourse that promotes women's silent consent to their own subjugation. The inconsistencies between the Wife's prologue and tale offer two different commentaries regarding women's position in society. These inconsistencies display the separation of what women want in society versus the reality of their placement. Analyzing the similarities and

differences between women contemporary writers of Chaucer's time in context with the Wife's tale supports the claim that despite its misogyny, the *Wife of Bath's tale* showcases women's discontent with societal treatment and thus functions as a feminist text.

From the beginning of the tale, Chaucer redistributes power from a dominative patriarchal center to one surrounding matriarchal influence. The tale describes: "By verray force, he rafte" a helpless maiden. (III 888) After raping her, the knight faces death as deemed by Arthur's court. However, this does not happen:

But that the queene and other ladyes mo
 So longe preyeden the knyng of grace
 Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
 And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,
 To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille. (III 894-898).

This restructuring of power, where the queen and her ladies have the power to choose the knights fate, offers a unique display of women's influence in the story. In Emma Lipton's article, "*Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the Wife of Bath's Tale*," she argues through this insertion of female judgement, "legal power is associated with female agency, in contrast to the rape victim who was objectified by the knight. The tale imagines the legal system as hospitable to female authority and as an instrument of potential change" (340). We see another moment of women's agency during the first meeting between the old hag and the knight. The old hag requires the Knight to enter a contract and promise himself to her, if she tells him what women desire. Lipton draws attention to the word *trouthe* being "repurposed by the old woman in the service of a promise to her – a self-professed ugly old woman of low status – rather than to a patriarchal authority" (342). The final contract between the hag and the knight becomes a marriage vow, the

most common oral contract in the late Middle Ages. Comparing these contracts to those in the *Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen becomes an object in service of men. In traditional society, contracts between men and women work in service of men and their authority. Women's role in this transaction focuses on them being the object of the contract. Counteractively, the contracts in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* "provide a way for women to gain power both individually and collectively" (Lipton 343). Lipton also points out the contracts that promote female agency feature an unmarried woman, while the other contracts belong to the men as a tool to objectify a married woman. The ability for a woman to have self-autonomy becomes unattainable once they become trapped in the contract of marriage. Chaucer reiterates this point at the end of the story when the hag ultimately wields her autonomy to the Knight, her then husband.

As Robert Correale and Mary Hamel point out in their book, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Vol. 1*, the story of the *Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Radgnell* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine* are sources for this tale. These tales focus on the women becoming attractive and have less ethical emphasis on her internal agency. Chaucer deviates from these stories by inserting monologues of moral instruction from the hag to the knight. Chaucer portrays a woman educating a man, and more significantly a knight, on "gentillesse." Women rank lower on the great chain of being; therefore, since the fall of Adam and Eve, the body does not tell the mind what to do. Using Eve's fall to inform the condition of all women, men represent the head, which tells the body, or woman, what to do. In medieval society, a man that listens or adheres to his wife also commits a dangerous act. The wife of bath's prologue itself attests to the manipulative and scheming notions women have. Through this deviation where a woman educates a knight on proper chivalrous behavior, Chaucer raises the moral stakes of the characters and depicts women with active agency. As we discussed in class, the DNA or the bare

plot of Chaucer's stories have to stay the same. Consequently, Chaucer manipulates, and revises characters fated to their endings; characters dependent on their authors, readers, and societies that created them. Chaucer cannot change the end; he must return to the man being in power and to the medieval realm of courtly love. However, he does change how the characters get to this end. Chaucer revises the common transformative story of the ugly hag becoming the beautiful and submissive wife by offering notions of woman's agency along the way. In this scope of analysis, Chaucer depicts societal roles for women that remain unavailable to them in the present state of medieval culture.

The framed narrative of men in power depicts the bookends of reality woman face in medieval society. Chaucer begins this story with a man exerting his power over a woman and raping her. He then ends the story with the same man receiving his own beautiful, obedient, and submissive wife. One can look at these bookends and forget about the active female agency in between. Debate remains about who should be considered the narrator of the Wife of Bath's tale: Chaucer himself or the Wife of Bath. Choosing to view the Wife herself as the narrator, she interrupts this fantastical realm where women assert their power and returns to their reality in society to show her own discontent with her placement in society. The Wife of Bath's discontent becomes more apparent when you compare her assertion of power over men in her prologue to the silence of women in her tale. While marriage was one of very few options for women during this time, the contract of marriage was no less limiting than were the overall options for women to begin with. Lipton points out that this new contract of marriage between the hag and the knight "focuses on the future instead of the past, and on the precarity of wifely sovereignty and happiness rather than of female safety" (348). Lipton also details in the end of her tale, the Wife offers a "present prayer ("I praye") and a curse ("God sende hem... pestilence") with the future

tense (“soone,” “wol”), looking forward to what will or could happen” (350). After ending her tale with the silencing of a character so counteractive to submission, the Wife has to get the last word in to showcase her displeasure with the interruption of realistic medieval society. This final hope calls for activism in working towards changing the position of women in society. The Wife’s monologue contradicts itself and displays the psychological impact the systems of power have over women and their self-worth. In Elaine Hansen’s book, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, she claims “throughout her performance the Wife both consciously and unconsciously endorses the antifeminist stereotypes she cites” (32). Hansen further argues that by turning herself into a Griselda or Emileye type character, the hag “relinquishes her power and dissolves into literal silence and alleged submission, the archetypal feminine transformation” (33). Hansen agrees with Lipton in that the Wife’s last words curses men, and her inability to have sovereignty over herself in a medieval society that regards negative treatment of women as an upholding of their hierarchical chain of being.

Looking at the *Wife of Bath’s tale* as Chaucer’s way of participating in conversation about the condition of women in medieval society, the importance of analyzing women contemporary writers from his time lies in consideration of their first hand female rhetoric. In Helen Cooney’s novel, *Writings on Love in the English Middle Ages*, she argues that the tale “is ostensibly a story about female sovereignty, about what women most desire. In practice, it is rather more about female autonomy, the women's freedom of choice” (40). Taking the interpretation of this tale as advocating for women’s freedom from control, the question arises, does this align with what contemporary woman want? In the article, “Medieval Models of Female Friendship in Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Margery Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kemp*” by Alexandra Verini, she contends that both Pizan and Kempe

advocate for their freedom from the restrictive society they live in. She argues that these female writers use their writing to promote women's agency and equality in their society. Verini states that Pizan focuses "on the exemplary status of women in her quest to legitimize herself as an author" (367). She addresses Kemp's "avocation of a spirituality that embraces mercantilism," where she could be a part of and "play a determining role, adds a further radical dimension of communal reciprocity" (367). In this context, Kempe explicitly works towards a freedom of choice, not unlike the autonomy the Wife of Bath advocates for. Christine De Pisan demands women deserve the freedom of choice by showing the lack of recognition women have had in a history told from the man's point of view. Jane Duran points out the misogynistic failure of acknowledging women's accomplishments in her article, "Christine De Pisan and the Development of a Philosophical View." Duran goes farther to point out that Christine does not simply complain about male depictions of women, "Christine hopes to overturn the misogynistic constructions with which she is frequently faced – and with which she was faced at the outset of her memoir – with facts" (342). Christine gives great lists of powerful women throughout history and counteracts man's reasoning for women subjugation by showing its unreason. Duran does point out Christine's special circumstances that set her apart from majority of women in medieval society. Duran notes the importance of recognizing, "Christine's level of education, quite unusual for its time, and her experience of having lived abroad from her native Italy" (337). In Sheila Delaney's "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and The Book of Margery Kempe" she draws attention to the status of Margery in comparison to the Wife of Bath. Delaney states, "Margery Kempe was what the Wife of Bath would have liked to be: socially prominent and well-to-do, a member of one of the most prominent families. In one of England's richest towns" (108). Both Duran and Delaney draw attention to the fact that these women were a part of

the aristocracy and had uncommon access to education. These advancements make them a small and selective group of women. Therefore, these women cannot be representative of all women from the 14th century. However, they do offer two points of view regarding women that cannot be overlooked and should be a part of the conversation when discussing Chaucer's own feminist rhetoric. Comparing these contemporary authors in tandem with Chaucer's rhetoric gives insight to the validity of Chaucer's depiction of women's dissatisfaction in medieval society. Turning first to Chaucer in comparison to Margery Kempe, we take a step towards paralleling Chaucer's depiction of women to actual women commentary.

Analyzing Chaucer's depiction of woman compared to Margery Kempe's own articulations of her experiences, parallels and contradictions exist between *The Wife of Bath* and Margery Kempe. Delaney defines the important term "sexual economics" in her article as "the psychological effects of economics necessity, specifically upon sexual mores" (104). Much of Delaney's argument focuses around the comparison of the fictional versus the real version of sexual economics. Delaney points out that Chaucer develops a theme in pointing out her marriage of five husbands, "her sexuality is as capitalistic as her trade" (104). *The Wife of Bath* attests to this capitalism:

Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle;
 With empty hand men may none haukes lure.
 For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,
 And make me a feyned appetit (III 414-17)

Within this passage, the Wife depicts this imagery of commerce, and displays her understanding that as a woman, "she is both merchant and commodity: her youth and beauty the initial capital and investment, and her age – the depreciation of the commodity – a condition against which she

must accumulate profit as rapidly and therefore as exploitively as possible” (Delaney 105). This understanding of oneself as not only a participant but the object of a capitalistic exchange changes the look of the Wife having five husbands and exerting control over them as one of condemnation to one of successful adaption to the inhuman stipulations and narrowed avenues for women in society. In detailing the life of Margery Kempe, Delaney points out the social reality that Margery gives us is one “that Chaucer could neither observe first-hand nor sympathize with if he saw” (109). Therefore, there remains a separation between the version of internalization of mercantile capitalism that Chaucer depicts through the Wife of Bath versus what Margery portrays in her biography. Chaucer focuses on depicting the commodification of sexuality, yet Margery shows us that “the bourgeois woman is far less likely to be a successful entrepreneur in her domestic life than she is to be an exploited worker” (109). While there are differences in their experiences, both women face the problems of constant awareness of money, perceiving themselves as property, and the alienated quality of their relationships. Through the portrayal of these same stipulations and problems, the Wife of Bath represents a valid contribution to commentary on women’s placement in medieval society. In medieval times, there was no concept of factual history from fiction, meaning something did not have to be real to be true. Just because the wife of bath is not real, does not mean she is not a true representation of women’s frustrations in society. Elaine Hansen backs this up when she says, “if women had ever authored stories, she points out, they would be very different ones; although actually, as she imagines it here, they would also be much the same - equally determined, that is, by the anxieties of gender difference and the resultant, allegedly inevitable competition between men and women” (34). Therefore, while it remains important to note the absence of an actual women in the narrative, we still see the same problems that arise in a patriarchal society built around the

oppression of women. Turning towards Chaucer in comparison to Christine de Pisan, we see more commonalities and disparities in their critique of women's role in society.

Chaucer and Christine approach similar topics of courtly love and women involvement, though both appeal to these topics from a different lens. In Theresa Coletti's article, "Paths of Long Study: Reading Chaucer and Christine de Pizan in Tandem," she points out the similar moves and same literary traditions these authors make in their writing that supports social change. She points out, "Chaucer and Christine mount critiques of courtly values and bear witness to courtly discourse's negative impact on women and gender relationships" (5). Coletti argues that both Chaucer and Christine are in a societal position to observe the subjectivities of women. Coletti states: "Chaucer and Christine mount critiques of courtly values and bear witness to courtly discourse's negative impact on women and gender relationships" (5). She also addresses Chaucer and Christine's use of literary cross-dressing: "Chaucer's extraordinary efforts to ventriloquize female voices and occupy feminine positions can be paralleled to Christine's experiments in writing the masculine voice" (6). Just as Chaucer embodies a woman's voice through the Wife of Bath, Christine does the same with the objective of questioning traditional male rhetoric and gender roles in society. Hansen echoes these sentiments when she says, "The Wife may also figure the female storyteller, overtly challenging and at the same time emulating both male authority and the male author" (28). This statement points out the dualistic characteristics that create the Wife of Bath. In the same book edited by Helen Cooney, Martha W. Driver has an article called "Romancing the *Rose*: The Readings of Chaucer and Christine." In this article Driver points out the Wife herself is a character influenced by one from the *Rose*. The Wife of Bath has similar characteristics as the old woman and of jealousy, two characters from this story. These characteristics that Chaucer adapts differ from the qualities

Christine advocates for in her novel, *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Driver attests to the disparities between the Wife and Christine: “Christine often advises virtuous women to tolerate impossible husbands, whom they may be able to influence for good – and if not, the long-suffering wife will ultimately be rewarded in heaven” (154). This contradicts the Wife’s insistence on manipulation to reap the earthly rewards from your husband(s). Driver argues that both authors “create authentic female voices that raise and address problems of identity and authority” (158). While they both offer critiques on society, Chaucer supports the courtly love relationships in the Rose while Christine condemns it. Driver mentions that they both “wrote for court audiences,” therefore you can conclude they both had their audience in the back of their minds while they were writing their social commentary. (148) Despite their differences in relation to the rose, Chaucer offers a transitional world through the Wife of Bath’s prologue and tale. There lies a striking mirror between the Wife’s commentary and Christine’s; both condemn what clerks have to say about women. Driver details this when she says, “In *The Letter of the God of Love*, Christine says that clerks blame women for all kinds of things, and like the Wife, she imagines a world in which the tables are turned” (155). This critical analysis points out both speakers suggest that Clerks, who are considered aristocratic and noble men, have fabricated their stories about women. While the Wife and Christine differ in their approach to gaining autonomy in this society, they both disagree with their current status dictated by men. Thus, both women advocate for the redistribution of women’s placement in society, and through this advocacy they show a paralleled dissatisfaction with their current suppression.

Breaking down the Wife of Bath’s tale in relation to Lipton’s argument, we view Chaucer offering feminist discourse that promotes women’s agency and structural change in society. The tale ultimately begins and ends with men in power, showing the inescapable realities imposed on

women in a society built around a male-centered dichotomy. Chaucer pointedly deviates from other translations of this tale by narrating a woman educating a man. This deviation elevates the old hag's transformation from one of strictly outward beauty to one of moral character. Chaucer transforms the restrictions of society by offering a formal contract between the hag and the knight that subsequently serves the agency and participation of women, rather than viewing them as the object of exchange. By adhering to the bare structure of the story and transforming the hag into the submissive wife, Chaucer depicts women's inability to have sovereignty over herself or her options in a restrictive society. Turning towards the contemporary writers of Margery Kemp and Christine de Pisan, we see they both advocate for women and work against the placement and liminality of their position in society. Questioning Chaucer's position in these conversations leads to an unveiling of his disparities and commonalities with these writers. The Wife of Bath cannot be held to the same standards as Margery and Christine as she is a character written by a man; Nonetheless, she accurately portrays the dissatisfaction women feel amongst a society that regards them with contempt. Looking at Chaucer's literature from a medieval lens, we know that just because the Wife of Bath is not real, does not mean she is not accurate or genuine. The inconsistencies between Chaucer's rhetoric and his woman contemporaries point out the crucial limitations of comparing a male's voice about woman's placement versus actual women perspectives. Despite the shortcoming of Chaucer's male-centered perspective on society and points of prejudice, The Wife of Bath's prologue and tale works as a pro-feminist text that offers readers a perspective of women's disdain for their position in a world built upon their suppression. Beyond showing woman's dissatisfaction, Chaucer gives us a brief look into a world that counteracts their subjugation and advocates for change in support of women's agency.

Despite Chaucer's limitations as a male author, he nonetheless participates and contributes to 14th century feminist rhetoric. Therefore, the Wife of Bath's tale performs as a feminist text.

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