
Logical Inconsistencies in the Wife of Bath's Tale: a Feminist Approach

In her Prologue and Tale, the Wife of Bath attempts to undermine the current misogynistic conceptions of women. Her struggle against the denigration of women has led to many feminist interpretations of her Tale, most portraying the Wife of Bath as something of a feminist icon. However, through contradictions in action and speech, the Wife proves that she conforms to many of the misogynistic stereotypes she is rallying against and thereby undermines a feminist reading. By exploring the implications of the Wife's inconsistencies, especially the resultant loss of her credibility, critic David Parker reinforces a non-feminist interpretation of the Wife of Bath in his essay, "Can We Trust the Wife of Bath?"

In anti-feminist tradition, writers accused women of being stupid, obnoxious, oversexed, deceitful, and manipulative. The Wife of Bath makes reference to such literature in her Prologue, such her reference to Eve as "the los of al mankinde" (Chaucer 726), and also her mention of Janekin's book of "wikked wives." Throughout her Prologue, the Wife attacks such portrayals of women, but in attacking them, she reveals them to be true. Through her own account of herself, the Wife is exposed to embody most of the flaws that anti-feminist literature serves to accuse women of possessing. For example, the Wife describes herself as sexually voracious, yet contradicts this stereotype with another as she claims that she only has sex to get money: "Winne whoso may, for al is for to selle;/ With empty hand men may no hawkes lure./ For winning wolde I al his lust edure,/ And make me a feined appetite" (420-423). Such an admission invokes images of prostitutes and immoral women who use their bodies to get what they want; hardly the image of the feminist ideal.

In fact, the Wife proudly admits to using sex to bring her husbands to submission: "Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce;/ Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce;/ I wolde no lenger in the bed abide/ If that I felte his arm over my side,/ Til he hadde maad his raunson unto me; Than wolde I suffer him do his nicetee" (413-418). She shamelessly uses her body as a bargaining chip, teasing her husbands and refusing them satisfaction until they have promised her gifts. The Wife is proud of her manipulative skills, and even boasts that the capacity for treachery is a gift from God given to all women: "For al swich wit is yiven us in our birthe:/ Deceite, weeping, spinning God hath yive/ To yivven kindly whil they may live" (406-408). She does not see her deceit or exploitation as wrong, nor does she explain that these actions are hers alone and are not representative of all women. Instead, she claims that all women have been granted the gift of deceit. The Wife of Bath thus reinforces misogynistic stereotypes and undermines her own position as a defender of women.

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In addition, in the opening of her Prologue the Wife claims that experience is her "auctoritee," for having been married five times, she thinks of herself as quite the expert. Yet, for some reason the Wife then feels the need to go against her own assertion that experience is the only authority she needs and she attempts to cite texts to back up her statements: "Whoso that nile be war by othere men,/ By him shal othere men corrected be./ Thise same wordes writeth Ptolomee:/ Rede in his Almageste and take it here" (186-189). However, this quote is not even in Ptolemy's *Almageste*, as she claims it is. In an attempt to make herself sound more learned and intellectual, it seems, the Wife merely makes herself look stupid.

In his analysis, English Professor David Parker argues that discrepancies in the Wife's descriptions of her fifth husband call the veracity of her entire account into question. In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath describes Janekin as a husband who "would beat her and then win her round by love-making" (Parker 55). Even with his abuse, the Wife claims that she loved Janekin the best of all her husbands because he kept her striving for "maistrye." By her own admission, it was this quest for control in the relationship that kept her marriage so happy: "We women han, if that I shal nat lie,/ In this matere a quainte fantasye:/ Waite what thing we may nat lightly have,/ Therafter wol we crye al day and crave;/ Forbede us thing, and that desiren we;/ Presse on us faste, and thanne wol we flee" (Chaucer 521-526). By refusing the Wife control, Janekin was keeping her interested. The Wife thus portrays not only herself, but all women as fickle creatures who love to be perpetually teased, if not dominated, by their husbands.

Then, further on in her Prologue, the Wife describes the squabble between herself and Janekin which leads to the resolution in which he cedes all power in the relationship to her. Following this, the Wife claims, "we hadde nevere debat./ God help me so, I was to him as kinde/ As any wif from Denmark unto Inde,/ And also trewe, and so was he to me" (828-831). This happy ending contradicts the Wife's earlier statement, however, and Parker points out that "to have been happy she would have needed, according to her own analysis of the nature of women, to be continually frustrated in her striving for 'maistrie'" (55). Thus, either the Wife's earlier assumption about the nature of "maistrye" is incorrect, or she did not in fact win complete control from Janekin. Either way, Parker claims, she has undermined her own credibility. She is untrustworthy as a character, as thus cannot be made the poster-girl for women's rights. She has cast herself, and all womankind, in a bad light.

Further inconsistencies lie in the Wife of Bath's Tale. It is easy to take a feminist view of this story of a rapist-knight who must discover what women desire the most: "maistrye." At the end it would seem that the knight has learned his lesson when he gives up control of the marriage to his wife, who is then transformed into a young and faithful beauty. The moral of the Tale seems to be that all women really want is control and once they have it, their men will be happier for it. However, this reading is undermined by the fact that it is unclear whether the knight really has

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enough respect for the old hag to let her choose, or whether he just says what he knows she wants to hear. After all, it seems that the knight really has not given up anything, for his wife then "obeyed him in every thing/ That mighte do him pleasance or liking" (Chaucer 1261-62). Herein lies yet another contradiction: the Wife's "professed beliefs in female sovereignty in marriage...are not finally followed by the heroine of her tale, who obeys her husband" (Parker 53). The Wife of Bath has told her Tale in an attempt to argue for the increased control of women in relationships, but she has unintentionally created an ending which perfectly adheres to an anti-feminist ideal in which a woman is voluntarily subjugated by her husband.

The Wife of Bath is an overtly manipulative woman who uses her sexuality as a tool against men. She conforms to a number of misogynistic stereotypes about the faults of women and even makes it seem as if some of these stereotypes are characteristic of all women. The constant contradictions found in the Wife's speech and character, as well as the reader's inability to trust her entire account, completely undermine a feminist reading of the Wife's Prologue and Tale. Instead, they seem to rather reinforce the anti-feminist views of women as manipulative, untruthful, oversexed, and fit to be dominated by their husbands.

Works Cited

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