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The Wife of Bath's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer in a Feminist Framework

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* holds *The Wife of Bath's Tale*; a story depicting a young knight's quest to find the answer to the question, "what is the thing that most of all women desire?" (Chaucer, 231). At the start of the short tale, King Arthur's knight had taken a maiden by force, a crime punishable by death. Alas to the reader's displeasure, the fairy queen begged King Arthur to spare his life and be given punishment by the ladies of her court. Arthur agrees, and the young knight sets out on a quest to solve this riddle in a year so that the fairy queen would spare his life. He asks every woman he comes across, and they say wealth, happiness, flattery, freedom, and just good sex. He had all these answers, but none were correct. The knight met an old hag on his journey who gave him the answer—that women want sovereignty and the ability to rule above men, and if she was correct, then the knight must take her as his wife. Her answer was approved by the court of ladies, and the knight's life was spared. He made a promise to marry the old hag and proceeded to do so with much reluctance. The woman is old, ugly, and poor, but she is pure. She offers the knight a choice: she will retain her physical features and remain a faithful wife, or she will become young and beautiful but a bad wife. The knight is lost and proposes that the old hag choose whatever she thinks is best. With this answer, the wife has been given sovereignty and promises to be both, changing magically into a young maiden who promises to always remain faithful. With that, the story ends with the couple's supposed happy ever after.

Yet as readers from the 21st century with a greater capacity to perceive feminist ideals, it is only natural that we have questions. What ever happened to the young maiden who was raped at the start of the story? Was the knight's punishment equal to the crime he committed? Did the knight actually learn his lesson—that women need to be given sovereignty in society—or did he just give up and relinquish control because he saw no clear answer? Did Chaucer intend for this to be a feminist story under the guise of another storyteller, or was this a critique of the mystery of women? In this essay, I will attempt to examine these questions concerning *The Wife of Bath's Tale* through a feminist framework supported by texts read in class by Simone de Beauvoir and Laura Mulvey, as well as scholarly articles by Anne McTaggart and Susan Carter, to ultimately determine whether or not this Medieval story is a feminist text.

After the knight commits his crime and is sent on a journey as punishment, he asks women all over the land a simple question: What do women want? The women come from different backgrounds, ages, and positions in society, and all give vastly different answers. Chaucer writes that in response to the knight's question, "some said wealth and some said jollity, some said position, some said sport in bed and often to be widowed, often wed. Some said that to a woman's heart what mattered above all else was to be pleased and flattered." (232). Now the reader can understand this scene from a few different standpoints. Is this a feminist text because the knight is forced to talk to women like the one he took advantage of to learn their desires and needs? Or is the knight sent on a mission to try to understand the complexity of what women want—an impossible task because men can never understand the mystery of women?

Simone de Beauvoir proposes an interesting myth of women that is applicable to the previous question, which she calls the feminine "mystery." The feminine mystery is "an easy explanation for anything that is inexplicable; the man who does not "understand" a woman is

happy to replace his subjective deficiency with an objective resistance; instead of admitting his ignorance, he recognizes the presence of a mystery exterior to himself; here is an excuse that flatters his laziness and vanity at the same time.” (Beauvoir, 1216). In the context of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, it is unclear whether the knight truly understands that women want sovereignty and the power to make their own choices or whether he perceives women to be a mystery and tells the hag to do whatever she wants because he gives up and accepts his fate. It seems to me that he feigns ignorance to show his disregard for the situation he’s in. The knight shows absolutely no remorse for stealing the young maiden’s virginity—a quality that determines her worth in Medieval society. He proceeds to be sent on a mission to find an answer to what women want, purely to save himself from being killed by the fairy queen’s court of ladies. He traveled for a year and asked multiple women what they wanted most, and yet he refused to hear their answers and assumed women were just another unsolvable mystery. The final answer he gives the fairy queen is that women want sovereignty; they want power over their own lives. If the knight had actually listened to the women he asked the question to, he would have realized that they all wanted the same thing. Wealth, jollity, position, and control over who they love—each thing mentioned stems from the lack of power women have in society. With no control over their lives, women are unable to fulfill any of their wishes. The only thing women in Medieval society had that was considered valuable was their virginity, and by taking the young maiden’s purity, the knight took away the only power that girl had.

Whether or not the knight actually learned his lesson is debated in Anne McTaggart’s article, “What Women Want? Mimesis and Gender in Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue’ and ‘Tale’” in which the author describes the knight’s “impressive and prolonged desire to remain ignorant of the meaning of his quest” (54). McTaggart agrees that the knight’s admission of the

old hag to make her own choices at the end of the story is not a reflection of what he has learned over the duration of his journey but rather a cry of defeat. “In other words, even after spending all that time asking women how they feel and what they desire, the newlywed knight is led to the bedchamber no less concerned with his own needs and desires, no closer to anything resembling selflessness or empathy than he was at the beginning... because the knight does not really want to know what women want; and, indeed, we can safely assume that, even as he is asking every woman he meets for the secret, what is really fixated on is saving his own life” as McTaggart graciously puts it (54). Interestingly enough, the author suggests that forcing the knight to marry and potentially sleep with an old hag is the knight’s true punishment for his crime. Susan Carter agrees with this notion in her article “Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies behind Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'” stating that “the hubris of the knight's act of rape invokes the nemesis by which his own flesh is surrendered to the humiliating role of sex object, obliged to fulfil the "queynte fantasye" (III 516) of a wise and powerful old fairy-woman.” (337). Much like the young maiden he sexually assaulted, the knight was put into a position where he was forced into an unwanted relationship. The key difference here is that the knight never had to sleep with the old hag; instead, she turned into a beautiful and faithful young woman, and they lived happily ever after. The young maiden from the start of the story didn’t get her happy ending. She was violated by the knight, and him ending up in a happy, loyal marriage is hardly an act of punishment.

The chosen ending of this story leads to more debate in the feminist community. Why did Chaucer choose this very unsatisfactory ending? Why didn’t the knight get a more suitable punishment? Unfortunately, the answer lies within the audience themselves. I do not believe that this story was originally written as a claim to feminist ideals, as disappointing as that is. We’re

trying to read this tale from the viewpoint of a 21st-century feminist when it was written by a Medieval man for a male audience. While this is written text and not film, Laura Mulvey offers up some great points that are applicable to *The Wife of Bath's Tale* stating that “the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her (visual) presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (1959). The women in the tale were fighting for sovereignty and the power to control their own lives, yet the old woman became a young maiden, and all of the previous plot was tossed aside as the now beautiful woman promised to be youthful and faithful and everything the knight could ever want, all while surrendering her own sovereignty. Like Mulvey says, there were women mentioned in the story before, and the plot continued on, but as soon as there was a young maiden in the knight's wedding bed, demure and submissive and promising him many delicious things, the story fell flat.

Therein lies the answer to why Chaucer chose this ending: it was not made for our present-day feminist ideals. Don't get me wrong, though; this text was certainly radical for its time. The women in the story were able to hold a position in court and punish the knight for the wrong he committed against a fellow woman. The story was progressing well, yet the old hag transformed into a beautiful maiden, and all hopes for a truly feminist ending were lost.

Chaucer made some risky moves by even including these feminist moments of Medieval women asking for sovereignty, but even then he was protected under the guise of this tale being written by a woman. The *Canterbury Tales* are unique in the sense that each story is actually being told by another character in an even larger story. Chaucer wrote this all-encompassing tale about travelers on a pilgrimage who each tell a different tale that reflects a certain aspect about the character telling it. Naturally, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is being told by the Wife of Bath, a

character who has had five husbands. When reading the prologue to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, one could easily dismiss this story as being about female revenge and a cry for freedom from this patriarchal society that forced the Wife of Bath to marry five times. Even if Chaucer was proposing subtly feminist ideals, I do not believe this can be considered a fully feminist text because he was hidden behind a female storyteller, and the ending completely destroys any feminist progress made beforehand.

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