

The Wife of Bath: The First Fully Developed Female Character in English Literature

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Abstract

This paper foregrounds the inconsistency in the theoretical and literary depictions of the medieval woman which both denigrated and idealized women and the documentary portrayals of the medieval woman. It highlights the idealistic representation of the heroines in Geoffrey Chaucer's early poems and the mundane traits of the Wife of Bath, thus making visible the contrast between the Wife of Bath and earlier female characters and the complexity of the Wife of Bath's character. The target of the paper is to show that Chaucer's Wife of Bath is the first elaborate female character in English literature. The significance of the paper to the audience lies in its exposure of the non-linearity of history and of the fact that in certain historical epochs as the medieval period women were more liberated than they were in later periods. It also uncovers how medieval women had awareness of the oppression of gender ideology, which dates as far back as the Greek period, and challenged gender oppression.

Keywords: Church, Aristocracy, Medieval Women, Chaucer's Earliest Heroines, The Wife of Bath

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1. Introduction

A close examination of the documents about medieval women and of medieval theories and literature reveals that there exists a discrepancy between real Middle Ages women and the theoretical and artistic representations of these women. The heroines the readers meet in medieval literature do not resemble the competent and practical women of the Middle Ages. Excluding Criseyde, the female characters present in Chaucer's earlier poems are feeble and ideal characters whose perfection is similar to that of saints. In contrast with these heroines, the Wife of Bath is extremely energetic, humorous, vulgar and shrewd. In this paper, I argue that unlike the female characters of *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Legend of Good Women*, the Wife of Bath displays human characteristics and is the first intricate heroine in English literature.

The paper is constituted of three sections. The first section throws light upon the contradiction between women in medieval theories and real medieval women. The second section shows how women in Chaucer's early poems are unrealistic. The third section brings out the human features of the Wife of Bath which make her a mundane and elaborate character.

2. Women in the Medieval Period

Documented records of women in the Middle Ages reveal that medieval theories presented women in an exaggeratedly distorted way. The church and the aristocracy were the politically influential powers of the age and, thus, were responsible for the theoretical misrepresentation of medieval women. Indeed, both the church and the aristocracy formulated inconsistent hypotheses about medieval women, and neither of them provided a genuine depiction of them. On the one hand, the church portrayed women, the daughters of Eve, as inferior and seductive beings who caused

men's deprivation from salvation. On the other hand, the church idealized woman by raising the Virgin Mary to the rank of holy saints capable of doing great miracles. Likewise, the aristocracy did not represent medieval women in an authentic way. They developed a set of rules known as the code of chivalry and created the principles of courtly love which determined how an ideal knight had to behave towards his beloved. By elaborating the theory of courtly love according to which an ideal knight was supposed to express his adoration for his beloved, the aristocracy, like the church, idealized women.

Apart from the theories of the church and the aristocracy, medieval woman was neither inferior to man nor ideal and was, instead, man's counterpart. She was able to successfully fill up the place of her husband when he was absent due to the successive crusades which took place at that period and the slow means of transportation which obliged them to stay away from home for a long time. During the absence of their husbands, medieval women, rather than wasting their time in trivial matters, managed and developed the business of their husbands and performed all their roles. Had the husband been captured by the enemies, it was his wife who accumulated the sum of money demanded for his release. In reality, medieval women were neither weak nor idealistic as depicted in the theory and literature of the age. Neither Grieselda nor La Belle Dame Sans Merci was encountered in the real world of the medieval period.

Even medieval women who did not marry or who became widows were not inferior to men. Both spinsters and widows of the feudal class carried out various types of agricultural work in order to support themselves. Unmarried women living in the city mastered various skills such as spinning and weaving. However, as nowadays, medieval women were paid less than men even though they were both performing the same work. The situation of upper-class spinsters was slightly more complicated. A noble lady had either to marry young or enter into the nunnery. Women had to pay a

specific amount of money before they were considered to be brides of Christ. By becoming members of the nunnery, noble spinsters would secure a revered social position for themselves.

Medieval women were not idealistic as well. Noble ladies who did not desire to remain spinsters welcomed the bridegroom whom their fathers agreed upon. Instead of the courtly love of the aristocracy, it was the financial interest of families which was of primary importance in medieval marriages. When the routine of daily life turned the married couples into friends, some medieval women, like men, sought for illegitimate partners to satisfy their sexual desires.

3. Women in Chaucer's Early Poems

Chaucer (1343-1400) is one of the fundamental writers of the medieval period. During his lifetime, Chaucer worked at many careers. In addition to being a poet, Chaucer was a bureaucrat, courtier and diplomat though he became famous as a poet. Chaucer wrote many poems, among of which are *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* which narrates the stories of a group of pilgrims going to Canterbury cathedral and for which Chaucer is best known today. Writing in vernacular English at a time when French and Latin were the languages used to write literature in England and translating many works into English such as Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Chaucer contributed to the prominence of vernacular Middle English and won renown as the father of English literature.

Chaucer's early poems follow the pattern of French romances. Similar to *The Roman de la Rose*, Chaucer's love poems take place in open spaces during the month of May. Besides, like French romances, these poems are dream visions which tell the stories of the dreamers. All these poems are written in accordance with the rules of courtly love, also called fine amour, the type of love appropriate for the members of the aristocracy. The worship of the lady by the knight is one of the essential characteristics of courtly love. The knight who watches his beloved from a distance

and feels the pangs of unfulfilled love usually has a trustworthy friend to whom he could express his agony. This friend ends up being a mediator between the lovers. The lady usually responds to the proposal of the knight in three ways. She might at first reject his love as White does in *The Book of the Duchess*. She might, as the female eagle of *The Parliament of Fowls*, delay taking up a resolution until she is entirely certain that the suitor deserves her love. Or, as Criseyde, she might sympathize with the anguished knight and indulge in an affair with him. However, secrecy, another important feature of courtly love, has to be preserved. No one is supposed to notice the relationship between the lovers in order not to impair the reputation of the lady who is either a wife or a widow.

The Book of the Duchess is an elegy dedicated to Blanche, John of Gaunt's first wife. The poet opens up his poem with an expression of deep sorrow due to unrequited love which makes the poet unable to sleep. In order to get rid of his insomnia, the poet reads the tale of Ceyx and Alcione. Then, the poet falls asleep and starts to dream. In his dream, the poet encounters a knight wearing black. Upon the dreamer's question about the cause of the knight's grief, the black knight tells the poet how Fortune deprived him of his perfect wife whom he loves very much.

In this poem, Chaucer presents to the readers two female characters, neither of whom could be met outside the books of literature. The first heroine, originally created by Ovid in his *Metamorphosis*, is Alcione whose deep sorrow upon her dead husband brings about her death. The other is White, the wife of the black knight, who is as perfect as a deity. The black knight portrays the physical and moral beauty of his beloved in a detailed way. In addition to her ravishing beauty which makes her glitter and shine as gems, White has also a noble character. She is tactful, honest and witty. She is a valuable gem and an inextinguishable light. She possesses a kind heart incapable of holding ill feelings toward others. Briefly, "she was the peer of all the noble women of song and story" (Bowden, 1964, p. 146). Blanche might be a good lady. Yet, the hyperboles employed by the

knight to depict her perfection transform her into an ideal rather than a flesh-and-blood woman liable to make mistakes.

The Book of the Duchess is a consolatory poem addressed to John of Gaunt. The black knight in this poem stands for John of Gaunt himself who, unlike the black knight, was able to transcend his agony and marry another woman. The fact that the real person the black knight represents overcame his anguish whereas the knight remains entangled in grief shows that Chaucer, in this poem, exaggerates the sorrows of his knight and misrepresents not only medieval women but also medieval men.

In *The Legend of Good Women*, the poet has a dream in which he sees the god of love, Amor, accompanied by his queen, Alceste, and followed by a group of women. The god of love blames the poet for committing a sin against love by translating *The Roman de la Rose* and narrating the story of faithless Criseyde. However, Alceste provides excuses for the dreamer's sin and entreats the god of love to be merciful with him. Therefore, the god of love dedicates the task of punishing the dreamer to Alceste who decides that the poet should write about faithful women. Thus, the poet composes nine legends about Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis and Hpermnestra.

In *The Legend of Good Women*, the poet narrates the legends of a number of historical and mythological female figures. All these women share the following noble characteristics: faithfulness, goodness and benevolence. All these women are always ready to lend a helping hand to tormented men. On the other hand, all men who enter into the lives of these women are selfish and egocentric. With the exception of Pyramus, all these men are cruel rogues who deceive their victims and bring them misery. Incidents of "rape, suicide, abandonment, despair, callous abuse, and cynical seduction" pervade the majority of these legends (Frank 1972, 26). For instance, Dido fell in love with Aeneas whom she allows to stay in her palace after the destruction of his ship.

However, he deserts her and returns to Rome. Ariadne, too, saves the life of Theseus who betrays her with her sister. Yet, Jason is The Legend's Don Juan. He deceives Hypsipyle, deserts Medea and marries a third woman. The heroines of *The Legend of Good Women* respond in an exaggerated and unrealistic way to the maltreatment of their lovers. Heartbroken and unable to overcome the departure of Aeneas, Dido commits suicide. Lucrece kills herself after she is raped by Tarquin, and Cleopatra throws herself into a snake pit after Mark Antony flees from the battle. The female characters encountered in *The Legend of Good Women* are different from Criseyda who betrays Troilus once she finds an alternative lover who cares about her. Unlike White and Dido, Criseyda is more realistic than idealistic. She is a transitional character who prepares the readers for the revolutionary and down-to-earth Wife of Bath.

4. The Wife of Bath as the First Complex heroine in English Literature

In complete contrast to these stereotypical heroines who do not reflect the actual situation of the medieval woman, the Wife of Bath brings up serious debate relevant to the human experience. The Wife of Bath is Chaucer's first genuine attempt to depict a realistic and complex female character. Indeed, the Wife represents women from different historical periods and forms of society who refuse to be dominated by their husbands, fight to gain social and economic equality and commit adultery due to sexual un-satisfaction. Being the first revolutionary and audacious woman in English literature who raises worldly debate, the Wife of Bath contrasts sharply with the heroines in Chaucer's early poems and establishes herself as the first round female character not only in medieval literature but also in English literature as a whole.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer juxtaposes different characters with each other in order to reveal the contradiction between two types of women present at that time. The other two women who accompany the group of pilgrims are nuns. The binary opposition between these virgin ladies and the wife of bath is quite obvious. Whereas these religious figures abstain from sex, the Wife of

Bath enjoys sex a lot. She has sexual intercourse with various men and has married five times. Though three of her husbands are old, they are not exempted from fulfilling their marital duty to the lustful Wife. Contrarily, they are obliged to exhaust themselves while trying to satisfy the Wife's sexual desires. Still, they do not gratify her lust and the Wife seeks sex with other partners.

In Chaucer's time, celibacy was highly praised by all religious preachers and spiritual love was the most sublime type of love even between man and wife. The clergymen of the Middle Ages emphasized the necessity of rising above the body's needs and abstaining from fleshly pleasures. Even married couples were recommended to intermingle only for the purpose of procreation and restrain their desires in order to redeem their souls from the corruption which befell their bodies after they lost their virginity. Those who engaged in sexual intercourses for mere pleasure were considered to be sinners. A medieval man who respected his wife was expected to be continent. Likewise, a virtuous wife had to be worthy of her husband's respect, and she was not supposed to be sexually demanding. Chastity and purity were the ideals that a medieval lady had to value highly and strive for.

This interpretation of the bible greatly disturbs the sensual Wife of Bath who has strong erotic feelings which she attributes to the influence of Venus upon her. Hence, The Wife of Bath opposes church fathers and refutes their preaching. Since the reason for marriage is the continuance of the human race, men and women, according to the Wife of Bath, should marry and be fruitful. Also, since human beings are not all perfect, therefore, they are not all able to be continent. The Wife of Bath uses examples from the bible to support her argument. She alludes to King Solomon who married many women and mentions the Saints who did not prohibit sexuality though they lived a virginal life dedicated to God, manifested through the Saints' comparison of virgin and chaste people to "pured whete seed" and married people to "barly breed". According to the Wife of Bath, barley bread is also valuable because Lord Jesus "refreshed many a man" with it ("The Wife of

Bath's Prologue and Tale", Lines 149-150, 152). The Wife of Bath argues that sex organs are not created only to get rid of urine and differentiate between men and women. They are also made so that men and women could experience sexual pleasure. On a personal level, the Wife of Bath never aspires to perfection and does not desire to remain virgin. On the contrary, she uses her "instrument ... eve and morwe" ("The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale", Line 155, 158).

In her prologue, the Wife of Bath reveals to the pilgrims details about her personal life and her relationship with her previous husbands. The Wife of Bath admits that she is not the ideal wife with whom men feel comfortable. On the contrary, she is an irritating, troublesome and jealous woman, and she continuously nags at her husbands who have, certainly, undergone severe psychological suffering in their married life. She accuses her old husbands of misery and of having secret relations with the neighbor and the maid and she blames them for insulting her and her race when they are drunk. Then, in line 388, she tells the readers that all these accusations are false. Furthermore, the Wife of Bath is a shrewd woman who knows quite well how to extract money from her husbands. She informs the readers that she employs the effective weapon of sexual deprivation in order to take money from them. However, the complete domination of the Wife over her husbands is still unsatisfactory to the garrulous Wife. Therefore, she gossips about her husbands and unfolds all their secrets to her friends, thus embarrassing her husbands and putting them under the domination of other members of her race.

In opposition to her first three marriages, the Wife's fourth marriage brings about change in her situation and divests her of the authority she used to have. The Wife who used to lay down the law in her first three marriages is no longer able to enjoy such authority. She is not young anymore, and she has lost most of her former charm and beauty. Hence, her fourth husband is not faithful to her. Nevertheless, the witty Wife takes her revenge on him and manages to make him suffer from

jealousy: “in his owene grece I made him frye, / For angre and for verray jealousye” (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”, Lines 494-495).

As in her fourth marriage, the Wife of Bath is not relaxed in her fifth marriage as well. Sexually satisfied with a youthful and handsome man, however, the Wife of Bath is not pleased. Her fifth husband is a clerk, and, like all the clergymen of the medieval age, he believes that women are naturally evil and inferior to men. Describing the attitude of the clergymen towards women, the Wife of Bath says: “it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wives, / But if it be of holy saintes lives, / N’of noon other womman nevere the mo--” (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”, Lines 132 694-697). Jenkin’s sexist opinion about women enrages the Wife and provokes her into tearing pages from his misogynistic book, which brings about a quarrel between them and the deafness of the Wife. After this quarrel, the Wife’s fifth husband submits to her and the Wife regains her authority.

In her tale, the Wife of Bath exposes one aspect of medieval relationships and shows that the medieval world was not full of romance and courtly love as depicted in medieval literature. Women in the medieval period were not ideal and virtuous nor were men courteous and chivalric lovers. Medieval men and women were ordinary rather than flawless beings. Ideal women as Blanche and the female protagonists of *The Legend of Good Women* are the production of creative imagination and they represent the utopian women that many men dream about rather than real medieval women who were bold and wise and who did not collapse under hardship.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between man and woman is the dominant theme of the Wife of bath’s tale. The marital conflicts the Wife of Bath’s tale throws light upon are problems that any couple might face because they have distinct personalities and different perceptions of life. Having dealt with worldly conflicts that people encounter anytime and anywhere, the Wife of Bath is a down-to-earth

and round heroine. Being the first of Chaucer's female protagonists who addresses such conflicts, she is the first thoroughly developed heroine in English literature.

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