Abstract

Middle English developed from Late Old English with a few changes in its grammar such as spelling, capitalization, punctuation and pronunciation. The literature from this period, that provides various insights, can be split into three main categories: Religious, Arthurian and Courtly love. Geoffrey Chaucer, also known as the father of English literature, is not only known for his famous work *The Canterbury Tales* but also the fact that he legitimized the native tongue during a time when the main languages were Latin and French. Chaucer used complex, unstable, and interrelated factors such as birth, profession, wealth, and personal ability to develop his characters and their status in a world that was constantly changing socially, economically, and politically. That is why while examining his work, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, it is interesting that he shows a certain amount of inherent feminism. Chaucer showed this by using and critiquing specifically misogynist writing that was nurtured centuries ago by the medieval church, such as St. Paul, the Church, Jerome’s diatribe and other anti-matrimonial and patriarchal literature, and Chaucer’s response to this was the creation of the Wife. The Wife shares information about her life and shows with examples that she has lived by the rule of experience rather than the authority of her time. To support herself and her promiscuity she not only uses King Solomon and St. Paul but also the biblical command to go forth and multiply. The Wife's main goal in her relationships is to gain sovereignty in one way or another. With her wit, humor and fantasies she creates a tale that fulfills her ideal concept that a happy match is when the woman has full sovereignty. This thesis analyzes the sources of authority used by Chaucer that appear in both the Narrator’s and the Wife's arguments, while showing that Chaucer and his writings are in fact ahead of his time.
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1. Introduction

Middle English literature covers written work from the 12th century until the 1470s, and is written in Middle English. Middle English was developed from Late Old English with many changes in its grammar such as spelling, capitalization, emphasis, punctuation and pronunciation. Middle English literature can be split into three main categories; Religious (sacred texts), Arthurian (works about King Arthur, his family, friends, enemies and the world around them), and Courtly love (a literary concept that emphasizes chivalry, nobility, and experience between spiritual attainment and erotic desire). These three categories allow us various insights into the literature of the period. For example, a closer look into Religious works reveals the following: there is the Katherine Group that praises the virtue of virginity and addresses anchoresses (women who withdraw themselves from a normal life to lead an intensely prayer-oriented life); the author Julian of Norwich who was an English anchoress and known as a spiritual authority in her community; and Richard Rolle, a mystic English hermit who wrote about religion. During this time, there were not only multiple Arthurian works written, but they were also written in multiple languages, and, in some cases, by anonymous authors. Some examples are: Culhwch and Olwen, written in Welsh by an anonymous author, Arthur and Merlin, in English by an anonymous author, and the great English story Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, by ‘The Pearl Poet’. Courtly love, on the other hand, is found in the writings of most major authors such as Dante, Sir Thomas Malory, John Gower and his good friend Geoffrey Chaucer. While going through these multiple writers, it was a rare sight seeing a woman's name, unless the anonymous writers were in fact all women. Women in the Middle Ages could occupy few social roles; wife, mother, nun, peasant (farm worker), artisan (craft worker), and other important roles such as queen regnant, abbess, or in other words, leaders of the state or religion.

The author/poet that stands out from this period, and is even known as the Father of English literature, is Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer was born in 1343 in London and died on the 25th of October, 1400. He was given the honor of being the first poet to be buried in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey. The Poets’ Corner is a certain section of Westminster Abbey where a high number of playwrights, writers and poets are both buried and commemorated. There are fifty-three writers/poets buried there and sadly only three
of them are women: Mary Eleanor Bowes, a poet and playwright; Mary Steele, a letter writer; and Eva Marie Veigel, a dancer. Thankfully that changes when it comes to the commemorated; there are over sixty poets/writers and more than eleven women. Chaucer had not only a passion for writing, but also for astronomy and philosophy. Despite all these passions, he maintained an active career as a civil service bureaucrat, diplomat, and courtier. Before mentioning many of his famous works it is necessary to note that his work was, in fact, crucial to the aspect of legitimizing the native tongue during a time when the dominant literary languages were Latin and French.

Chaucer wrote many works that became famous: The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Legend of Good Women and The Canterbury Tales. The Canterbury Tales is his best-known work today, written between 1387-1400, and is a collection of twenty-four stories. Instead of writing with regard to a society that is made up of three estates, Chaucer used more complex, unstable, and interrelated, factors such as birth, profession, wealth, and personal ability, to develop his characters and their status in a world that was constantly changing socially, economically, and politically. From The Canterbury Tales, the story that stays in one’s mind is The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, not only because of its impressive writing, but also because of its inherent feminism. Before the Wife tells her tale she first starts off with a prologue where she shares information about her life and announces that she has always lived by the rule of experience rather than authority. For example, the fact that she has been married five times, which in her mind gives her the experience to call herself an expert rather than fall under the typical authority chain. To support herself she not only uses King Solomon and St. Paul but also the biblical command to go forth and multiply. In every single one of her marriages the Wife gains sovereignty in one way or another and by using her wit, humor and fantasies she creates the tale and fulfills the concept that a happy match is in fact a match where the woman has full sovereignty. In this thesis, I wish to analyze the sources of authority used by Chaucer, in the context of traditional, historical, and social, viewpoints that appear both in the Narrator’s and The Wife’s arguments. Despite being on opposite sides of the matter at hand, I wish to explore these writings and their uses in order to prove that Chaucer and his writing are, in fact, ahead of their time, and that authority knows no gender.
2. Feminism

Feminism is sometimes seen as being split into two aspects: “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” and “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests”.

The layman’s term for a feminist that is in most cases used in today's society can be understood in several ways, both negative and positive. Many find the word being negative and synonymous with man-hating, a person that sees feminism as advocating rights for women at the cost of men or not advocating at all. Then we have the positive meaning where there should be equal rights for both sexes. Interestingly, one of the women to echo The Wife’s sentiments in contemporary times is Emma Watson. In her speech to the United Nations, as the UN Women’s Goodwill Ambassador, Watson recounted how, during her short life, she has been called bossy, sexualized, and been said to have strong and aggressive opinions. Due to this, she said, she came to the conclusion that she was, in fact, a feminist. I could not help but think about The Wife, when Watson said: “I think it is right that women be involved on my behalf in the policies and the decisions that will affect my life. I think it is right that socially I am afforded the same respect as men.”

The fact that Watson needs to say this in the year 2017 indicates that this is, sadly, an ongoing battle without any type of light at the end of the tunnel. Evidence of this is the fact that, this January, the President of one of the biggest countries in the world, signed an executive order that stops funding to organizations which offer abortion services to women, without having a single female in the room. The Order was clearly created and signed without consulting a single woman, signaling the fact that, 700 years later, a strongly patriarchal power structure continues to produce men who decide the fate of women. The Wife was not fully created until after Chaucer's death by other scholars, between the years 1405-1410, and was, to my thinking, a feminist; this is obvious from just the first three lines of her prologue. “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in

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this world, is right ynoough for me / To speke of wo that is in mairie: ".3 Obviously, she has not reached the heights feminists have today, but she is, in some ways, a worthy predecessor.

3. Chaucer challenges misogynist writing

While writing *The Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue*, Chaucer used and critiqued specifically misogynist writing that was nurtured centuries ago by the medieval church, in other words, written by a person who despises women. In response to men, institutions, and literature such as St. Paul, the Church, Jerome’s diatribe and other anti-matrimonial and patriarchal literature, Chaucer created the Wife. Of special note, is the work, *St. Jerome’s Adversus Jovinianum*, which had the specific purpose of showing why men should not marry, recommending chastity for women, disproving the proposition put forward by one Jovinianus, that marriage and virginity were in fact equally worthy. While looking at examples from *St. Jerome’s Adversus Jovinianum*, the only thing that comes to mind is the insecurity of the male sex and the fear of how women can impact them.⁴

St. Jerome takes the example of Socrates and his two wives, Xantippe and Myron, who is the granddaughter of Aristides. St. Jerome states that “they frequently quarreled, and he was accustomed to banter them for disagreeing about him, he being the ugliest of men, with snub nose, bald forehead, rough-haired, and bandy-legged. At last they planned an attack upon him, and having punished him severely and put him to flight, vexed him for a long time.”⁵

In a way blaming the women for his unattractive looks and the fact that his wives expressed their opinions, they are made to look quarrelsome and vindictive, thus taking revenge on him. And then another example where he shows the worth of women and their virginity by quoting a very learned man, who says

“that chastity must be preserved at all costs, and that when it is lost all virtue falls to the ground. This holds the primacy of all virtues in woman. This it is that makes up for a wife’s poverty, enhances her riches, redeems her deformity, gives grace to her beauty; it makes her act in a way worthy of her forefathers whose blood it does not taint with bastard offspring; of her children, who through it have no need to blush for their mother, or to be in doubt about their father; and above all, of herself, since it defends her from

⁵ Jerome. *Against Jovinianus*. P. 49.
external violation. There is no greater calamity connected with captivity than to be the victim of another's lust." 6

This statement is not only very unrealistic but it puts immense pressure on the female sex. By not holding onto your virginity, you, as a woman, are disappointing almost everyone, not only in your life but also in the world.

Another obvious aspect of The Prologue, is the fact that the Wife is a widow who remarries more than once, which suggests another way in which she challenges the anti-feminist traditions. Chaucer, on the other hand, not fully accepting feminism, asks a great question using St. Paul and his Lamach example: "He saieth that to be wedded is no sinne: / Bet is to be wedded than to brinne. / What reketh me thought folk saye vilainye / Of shrewed (cursed) Lamech and his bigamye?" 7 With this quote, St. Paul is saying that getting married isn't a sin, it is better than to burn from passion, but in a way using Lamach, his bigamy, and the curse to scare people from marriage. Lamach is the first man that is mentioned in the Bible to have had two wives, Adah and Zillah, in Genesis 4.19-24, and that man is cursed after killing a man that wounded him, and because of the ancient curse of Cain he must pay back sevenfold. But due to lack of information and him being the first one, many can use and blame this on the aspect of being married and to make it worse, being married to twice. The wife's response to this and observations that contradict this and give further evidence: "For hadde God comanded maidenhede, / Thanne hadde he damned (condemned) wedding with the deede; / And certes, if there were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?" 8 With these lines she is, in fact, agreeing with St. Jerome’s Adversus Jovinianum and his disapproval that men should not marry and women should remain virgins by using God. Even before this, she states that “God bad us for to waxe and multiply”, 9 which is a reference to the Bible, Genesis 1:28 “God blesses them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Using God as a defense for her promiscuity is not only brave but also very bold, even though her interpretations of the scripture are in some ways tailored to suit her own

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6 Jerome. Against Jovinianus. P. 49.
dilemma. For example, the Wife refers to Paul the Apostle’s views on marriage. In the text, she states "An housbonde wol I have, I wol nat lette, / Which shal be bothe my dettour (debtor) and my thral (slave), / And have his tribulacion withal (as well) / Upon his flessh whil that I am his wif. / I have the power during al my lif / Upon his propre (own) body, and nat he: / Right thus th’Apostle told it unto me..."  

In a way, you can say that Paul the Apostle was a realist and the wife took advantage of that. Paul wanted men and women to hold on to their virginity but he also knew that sexual immorality was inevitable so he admitted that sexual relations should only be carried out with their spouse. The Wife extends Paul’s idea of mutual surrender to her own authority over her husband’s body. For Paul, it is not just the man yielding but also the woman; for the Wife, the emphasis is on the husband yielding to his wife. Paul also states that to avoid the temptations Satan can bring, due to your lack of self-control, one should “not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourself to prayer.”  

Following this, Paul also mentions the unmarried women, and the widows, and recommends staying unmarried; but if they cannot control their urges, they should marry rather than burn with passion. This is a principle that the wife, without a doubt, lives by, having been married five times. There seems to be a kind of contradiction at the heart of the Wife: on the one hand, she appears to be living by and embodying patriarchal principals, while on the other hand, she fights against the restraints and standards set by male authority. But despite the fact that the wife embodies, in some ways, the patriarchal beliefs of her time, she also does her best to resist them. The Wife's longing for sovereignty, without fully knowing what kind of sovereignty she wants - economic security, coercive domination, or trust - she uses illogical arguments that often contradict each other but allow her to avoid becoming a patriarchal woman. Her many marriages can be seen as her surrender to the patriarchal order that makes marriage a compulsion, but on the other hand, her marriages are an example of her mocking the clerical teachings in regard to the remarriage of widows. Indeed, rich widows were often seen as equal to, or even more desirable than, a virgin with property. This is something the wife illustrates by describing her ability to not only remarry four times, but also marry a man much younger than her, Jankyn.

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Her multiple marriages do not entirely save her from the charge of sexual promiscuity. But the wife not only uses God to support her promiscuity, she also cites famous kings.

"Lo, here the wise king daun (master) Salomon: / I trowe (believe) he hadde wives many oon, / As wolde God it leveau (permissible) were to me / To be refresshed half so ofte as he."\(^{12}\) This is a reference to King Solomon, the king who had seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines/mistresses. So, you can say that in the Wife's mind, if King Solomon had that right, so should she. She slyly points to the double standards of the patriarchy, whereby men may have as many as a thousand women at the same time, while women are denied even one, or another husband if one dies.

If we consider where the Wife needs authority, it is obvious that it is in her relationships with her husband. We do not get a lot of information with regard to her husbands but she begins by stating that “three of hem were goode, and two were badde”\(^{13}\). Husbands one, two, and three, were all very similar and, as she says that “The three men were goode, and riche, and olde”\(^{14}\) and possibly due to this, they were easily dominated. She also mentions that they did not manage to fulfill her sexual appetite, indicating also that they were all very old. Her way of making them bow down to her authority was accusing them of being disrespectful to her while drunk; “Thou saist to me, it is a greet mischief (misfortune) / To wedde a poore womman for costage. / And if that she be riche, of heigh parage (descent), / Thanne saistou that it is a tormentrye / To suffre hir pride and hir malencolye (bad humor)”\(^{15}\). From this quote you can see that the Wife is using a guilt trip and alcohol to gain control. Guilt tripping (“make someone feel guilty, especially in order to induce them to do something”) is a very well-known saying in the world of women, especially when it comes to men. Despite this, the fact that the Wife is speaking openly about how her husbands have treated her is not only courageous but also exceptional during this period, the Middle Ages was not a very liberal time, especially in regard to women, where St. Paul forbade women from teaching and instructed them to remain silent.

When talking about these husbands, the reader can almost feel the strength of the Wife’s self-esteem, and she seems almost to get satisfaction out of being the dominator in their relationships. This is another characteristic that proves her to be at the beginning stages of feminism. Due to the so-called morally weak Eve, women have always and will always in some way have to fight for equality. In medieval art the serpent tempts Eve, a woman, and Sin is often represented with a female head, being the inferior sex and likely to tempt men into sin. The contrast to the negative image Eve represents is the Virgin Mary, a strong representative of chastity and motherhood. According to Christian faith the Virgin Mary was in some ways the second Eve, and made up for the sins of Eve. For the medieval woman, any kind of sexuality was a reminder of Eve’s original sin, and was considered a sin in itself. In many ways, between the two stereotypes of Sin and Virtue, there was no middle road for women, something Chaucer is trying to change by using the Wife, and her frankness in regard to husbands and desires.

Husband four, on the other hand, is described in detail, and the main reason for this is because he not only had a lover on the side, but also did not bow down to his wife’s authority as easily as the first three. She starts off by saying;

“I saye I hadde in herte greet despit / That he of any other hadde delit, / But he was quit (paid back), by God and by Saint Joce: / I made him of the same wode a croce / Nat of my body in no foul manere /..... / For God it woot, he sat ful ofte and soong / Whan that his sho ful bitterly him wroong (pinched). / Ther was no wight save God and he that wiste (knew) / In many wise how sore I him twiste”.

Due to this the Wife took a different approach when trying to dominate him. The Wife makes him believe that she also has a lover and is cheating on him. Similar to other men, he cannot handle the thought of his wife being equal to him, and both having lovers, so the jealousy drove him crazy, “That in his owene grece I made him frye, / For angre and for verry jalousye”.

With this part of the prologue, the Wife not only shows us a different method in which she achieves domination over her partner, but it is also the first time that she shows a certain vulnerability; the fact that her husband took delight in other women was something that upset her. However, this love does not last long because; at his funeral,
the Wife has already spotted her next victim. That is the young Jenkyn and they are married a month after the funeral. Shortly after their honeymoon, the Wife realizes Jenkyn was reading books that regard women as being of little worth, as he starts to read out loud one night. This is the author, Chaucer, taking multiple stories of wicked women who have been unfaithful, murderesses, and prostitutes, from the works of both St. Jerome and Walter Map. This narrative strategy can be seen as Chaucer’s own voice, citing other women’s faults, and using those experiences as an indictment of the Wife.

For example, there is the story of Eve and the forbidden fruit, Deianira bringing Hercules to commit suicide by fire: “Thro redde he me, if that I shal nat lien, / Of Ercules and of his Dianire, / That caused him to sette himself afire.”; Clytemnestra’s slaying of her husband with the help of her lover: “Of Clytermistra for hir lecherye / That falsly made hir housebonde for to die, / He redde it with ful good devocioun.”; Eriphyle’s betrayal of her husband and forcing him to go to war: “Myn housbonde hadde a legende of his wif / Eriphylem, that for an ouche (trinket) of gold / Hath prively unto the Greekes told / Wher that hir housbonde hidde him in a place, / For which he hadde at Thebes sory grace.”; Livia murdering her husband for her lover, and Lucilla poisoning her husband with a potion that was supposed to keep him faithful: “They bothe made hir husbondes for to die, / That oon for love, that other was for hate;” This is something the Wife cannot tolerate, which is something that can be looked at from different angles similar to feminism. She might just be getting annoyed due to the fact that he is a misogynistic or the sad fact that she might in some way be similar to those women, having married Jenkyn only a month after the death of her fourth husband, so she grabs the book and hits him so hard that he falls backwards into the fire. His reaction, as she states in the prologue, is very dramatic:

“And with his fist he smoot me on the heed (head) / That in the floor I lay as I were deed (dead). / And whan he sawgh how stille that I lay, / He was agast, and wold

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have fled his way, / Til atte laste out of my swough (swoon) I braide (started): / “O hastou slain me, false thief?” I saide,”.23

He is so overcome with guilt that he promises her anything if she will live, and this is her way of gaining dominance over her last and final husband. After this life-changing night, she is a true and faithful wife until the day he dies, and despite his ill treatment of her and the fact that he is a misogynist, she loves him the most of all five. This could be due, not only to his abilities in bed, but also the difficulty she went through to gain control over him. (Incidentally, one wonders how she outlived this husband, being twice his age.) Though the wife may appear to be a perfect example of the patriarchy in some of her actions and thoughts, she also fights and attacks patriarchal (literally meaning “the rule of the father) notions by helping the reader realize that it is men such as Aristotle and his works that portray women as intellectually, physically and morally inferior to the male sex and that they only have the role to reproduce and serve men in the household. These men, even our dear Chaucer, have created these notions and systems to begin with. We can see the Wife as a woman who both challenges as well as exploits the system in which she lives, in order to not just survive as a woman, but also to thrive as an individual. Chaucer, however, does not fully give her that power and thus the reason for the fact that her arguments are all gathered secondhand from one of her husband's.24

The Wife is a woman who defends her rights, asserts her female experiences and justifies her life as a five times married woman. Despite the fact that she conforms to most antifeminist judgments she also manages to make fun of the shallow stereotypes regarding women and marriage by showing the complexity of her own character and life decisions. What makes the character of the Wife noteworthy is the fact that, instead of following the rule of authority, she follows the dictates of her own experience and defends her position. She uses both her own experience as a woman, as well as patriarchal and religious authority, referencing the Bible and famous kings, making it almost impossible for her fellow pilgrims to take her down or humiliate her.

That Chaucer uses a certain novelistic narrative technique by creating the Wife and by using other characters to interrupt her at various points so Chaucer can express his own opinions about her experiences is in fact remarkable for this being a mediaeval poem. Chaucer also uses this as a way to get to show the Wife's personality better; each interruption provokes an expository response, her confidence and forcefulness handling those Pilgrims that are interrupting. For example, the Pardoner and his comment expresses approval of what the Wife has said but in the same breath, his disapproval of women; “Up sterle (started) the Pardoner and that anoon (at once): / “Now dame,” quod he, “by God and by Saint John, / Ye been a noble prechour in this cas. / I was aboute to wedde a wif: allas, / What (why) sholde I bye (purchase) it on my flessh so dere? / Yit hadde I levere (rather) wedde no wif toyere (this year).” “Abid,” quod she, “my tale is nat bigonne.” as the Wife responds ironically by stating that the worse is yet to come and he will know the full horror of marriage before she is done.

The interruption of the Friar making fun of how long this prologue is, in itself does not cause a problem, were it not for the quarrel it causes between him and the Summoner that the Host has to end, thus finally annoying the Wife: “The Frere lough (laughed) whan he hadde herd all thi s: / “Now dame,” quod he, “so have I joye or blis, / This is a long preamble of a tale.” / And whan the Somnour herde the Frere gale (exclaim), / “Lo,” quod the Somnour, “Goddes armes two, / A frere wol entremette him everemo!” Once again, the Wife shows us her eloquence and wit by ridiculing him and sarcastically asking for his permission to start her Tale: ““Al redy sire,” quod she, “right as you lest (it pleases) / If I have licence of this worthy Frere.” / “Yis, dame,” quod he, “tel forth and I wol heere”. With these examples you can see that overall her audience is fascinated with what she is saying even though they might not necessarily agree with her.

The Wife’s life experiences, which include her having been married five times, makes her something of an expert on the subject. As she says, she is able “To speke of wo that is in marriage:”, indicating that this will, in fact, be her theme of her Tale.

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Thus, remaining true to her own experience and her own self. During the Wife’s prologue, she never pretends to be something she isn’t. In fact she readily admits to not aspiring to be a virgin, “He spak to hem that wolde live parfitly (perfectly) / And lوردings, by youre leve, that am nat I.” Instead, she argues against the view that our genitals were only made to urinate, using, instead, her own experience to assert that they have been shown to be used for pleasure and procreation; “I say this, that they been maad for bothe / That is to sayn, for office (use) and for ese (pleasure) / Of engendrure (procreation), there we nat God displese”.

In her mind, there is also nothing wrong with being a virgin, as long as it is not a decision that is forced onto people: “I nil (will not) envye no virginitee: / Lat hem be breed (bread) of pured (refined) whete seed, / And lat us wives hote (be called) barly breed / And yit with barly breed, Mark telle can, / Oure Lord Jesu refresshed many a man. / In swich estaat as God hath cleped us / I wol perservere: I nam nat precious (fastidious). / In wifhood wol I use my instrument / As freely (generously) as my Makere hath it sent”.

This quote from the prologue is a very important one, specifically the last two lines that state in more modern English from an interlinear translation, “In wif hood I will use my instrument / As freely as my Maker has bestowed it” (Hopper lines 155-156). The reason for the importance of this is that she is claiming that God made women the way they are, sexual beings, and therefore she is only doing God’s will. Talking about this so freely, having God on her side, not only makes her confident in her own body, but also with her actions. In doing so, she is openly challenging the traditional, patriarchal, interpretation of sex as being only for procreation, and never for the pleasure of women. When looking at this quote from the context of the prologue as a whole, she is also hinting at the double standards between the sexes and her fight for gender equality, another aspect that is obvious when looking at her audience of pilgrims.

In this, the Wife’s struggle is very similar to what feminists are fighting today: how and what women can do with their own bodies is still an important debate. Drawing on her own experiences, the Wife offers other wives some advice on how to manage their

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husbands, or in other words, how to achieve sovereignty over their husbands. The first thing she starts off with is verbal assault, where the husband is accused of meanness with regard to his wife. She mentions seemingly innocent things such as clothing allowance, lustfulness towards the neighbor's wife or maid, drunken claims of her affair with other men, ranting against a wife's nagging, not praising her enough or being rude to her relatives, and trying to restrict her movements. Without a doubt these are all things that women have to deal with today, especially fights in regard to how much the wife/girlfriend might shop, cheating incidents, nagging issues and the classic one where the husband doesn't notice his wife's new hairdo, outfit or doesn't appreciate all the work and sacrifices the wife has made while taking care of the home or raising their children. These are issues that will most likely never change and the reason for that is simple. The male sex has never been under the same constant criticism (The sinful Eve) or held by the same strict standard (The Virgin Mary) as the female sex, so why change. Of course, there are exceptions, but they are rare, and hopefully this rare breed will spread and make the world a better and equal place. Thus, while reading The Wife of Bath's Tale, the reader, either male or female, can relate, men never knowing what women truly want and women wishing for a chance like that to teach men the true lesson of women.

Then the Wife moves on to tell them how she would accuse her husbands; “O Lord, the paine I dide hem and the wo, / Ful giltelees, by Goddes sweete pine (suffering)! / For as an hors I coude bite and whine (whinny), / I coude plaine (complain) and (if) I was in the gilt, / Or elles often time I hadde been spilt (ruined)” 33 The Wife manages to conceal her own faults, some of which cannot even be defended, by showing how unreasonable her husband's attitude is. Her way of avoiding accusations, was by taking the offensive route: for example, by justifying her own nighttime excursion by claiming that she was spying on her husband’s lovers. Her skills of nagging and forcing her own way are aspects she knew would help her gain control, and if her husbands got mad, she would resort to quoting the Bible. The Wife would say, “Sith ye so preche of Jobes pacience”, 34 and then she would argue that men are more reasonable than women, thus catering to their egos, and ending the argument by satisfying them. The Wife is represented in a portrait in the general prologue as forceful, lively, and wealthy, but not

beautiful. During her own prologue, on the other hand, we get a better insight into her personally, how she seems to use her wit and confidence to get by and get what she wants from life. She is also not represented as being exceptional, or heroic, but rather as an average woman, neither good nor evil. That is obvious when considering what she says and how she communicates with the audience she has; how she talks with the voice of advice for wives, yet out of the twenty-four pilgrims listening, there are only two women and, to make it even better, they are both nuns. This factor of The Canterbury Tales is very humorous and proves that Chaucer is the great writer he is.

Another aspect of the Wife is the fact that she believes that her character has been determined by her horoscope, a part of an even larger claim that stars made her into who she is, and not just any parts of her character, but her dominant characteristics. The Wife states, “For certes I am al Venerien / In feeling, and myn herte is Marcien: / Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse (amorousness), / And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse. / My ascendent was Taur and Mars therinne / Allas, allas, that evere love was sinne!”35 In traditional mythology prevalent even during Chaucer’s day, Venus is the Goddess of Love, representing two areas of life; love and money, and ruling over our sentiments of what we value and take pleasure in, in life. Mars, on the other hand, is the red planet, filled with energy, passion, drive and determination. This fierce planet commands people to stand up, get things done, be noticed or, in other words, speaks to the confidence and power of the individual’s expression. Mars also rules over the individual’s sexuality and sexual energy. Venus and Mars represent, in other words, the feminine and the masculine principles. As with many other things in The Wife of Bath’s prologue, this, too, remains a contemporary idea. In 1992, a book called Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, written by John Gray, an American relationship counselor, was a popular best-seller. He states that the most common relationship problem between the sexes is the result of crucial psychological differences between them. This approach tied in well with the concept given by patriarchal elements that women are the inferior sex. This author uses fancier words and some jargon, and fools readers, while in fact confirming the old stereotype that women are wrapped in sentiments and men are determined and driven.36 In this sense the

fact that the Wife is comparing herself to both planets is yet another great futuristic aspect of the writings of Chaucer. He even makes the Wife take this so literally as to say that her face and genitalia are marked, and because of this mixture she follows her appetite for all kinds of men and loves impulsively, thus giving her strength to seek control over all her husbands.
4. Chaucer’s use of authority

Authority can be defined as the “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior”, similar to how Chaucer uses various authorities in The Canterbury Tales. The Wife’s Tale is the first of seven other stories in The Canterbury Tales (Friar, Summoner, Clerk, Merchant, Squire, and Franklin) and are, together, known as the “Marriage Group”. The reason for this nickname is that all of them deal with the subject of authority with regard to marriage in one way or another. Chaucer gives a certain type of extra respect to the Wife by giving her an unusually long prologue that is, in fact, longer than her tale. In most cases, the prologue is just an introduction to the tale, but in the Wife’s case, the tale is more of a sequel to the prologue.

The Wife's tale takes place in King Arthur's court (the place of courtly love) where a young knight rapes a beautiful young woman, and the law of the land demands that the knight should be beheaded. Despite this, the queen and the ladies of the court beg for them to be allowed to determine the knight's destiny. After getting to know the Wife in the prologue, the knight's punishment is not surprising. The knight gets a year to discover what it is that women most desire. After a quick year, the knight rides back to court knowing he is about to lose his life, then suddenly he witnesses twenty-four beautiful young women singing and dancing. Quickly, after he approaches, the women disappear and the only thing left standing is an ugly old woman. After talking about his dilemma, the old woman promises to give him the right answer, if he does what she demands for saving his life. This is something the knight cannot refuse, so when the queen asks the knight to speak, he responds with the right answer, and that is that what women desire most of all is sovereignty over their husbands. After that lifesaving moment, the ugly old woman demands that she shall become not only his wife but also his love. The night of their wedding, after the knight pays no attention to the ugly old woman next to him, she questions him and he confesses that her ugliness, age and low breeding are repulsive. With this the old ugly women tells him that true respectability lies not appearance, but in morality. She then tells him that her lack of good looks is an asset, not looks that other men desire, thus making her a faithful wife. Once again, she offers him a choice: ugly old woman that is faithful, or a beautiful woman that he must be insecure about. Surprisingly
the knight lets her decide, which wins over her heart, and thus gives him a beautiful and faithful wife.

Once again, the Wife shows that her views are those that belong to the beginning stages of feminism. Saying that only unattractive women can be truly faithful wives might appear anti-feminist, of course, but on the other hand, her longing for sovereignty, gaining it, and inspiring the knight to grant her the freedom of choice focuses on one of the hallmarks of feminism. Chaucer is a remarkable writer, in that he manages to bring both sides of authority into one narrative, and show his readers his own view of, not only women, but also feminism.

It is obvious that Chaucer is a man fascinated with the role of women during the Middle Ages. He constantly uses sources such as the writings of the Church, St. Jerome, and Walter Map, to reflect women's positions. Nevertheless, he is determined to show that women are not made humble and weak, but become so due to male dominance, and that women can be strong-willed and powerful. He does this by using sources such as St. Paul and King Solomon, as well as the experiences set forth by the Wife. By doing so, Chaucer breaks the typical mold of the medievalist attitude towards women. Despite the fact that Chaucer is talking about debatable aspects with regard to women, such as the right of women over their bodies and place in society, during this period of time such views had yet to be termed ‘feminism’, which is the term we would use today. But the long-held ideas about the rights of women were being questioned at that time and the complex nature of women and their role in society was being reevaluated more in favor of women. To put this in a better historical context, all these issues are also connected to the power struggle between the kings and the church, but similar to our own history the fight for women has had backlashes, such as after both of the world wars, where women got to know what it was like to work and take care of the home while the men were at war, yet had to go back to their “normal” life when their husbands came home. Sadly, this was just the beginning of a long process that is still going on today under the great name feminism.

The Wife of Bath is not the only female character Chaucer uses to reflect his views on women’s issues; there are only two other female characters, the Nun and the Prioress. Even though these characters are surrounded by many different kinds of men, these women and their tales made men think twice before angering them. All these women have
authority, money, and an air of independence and self-esteem about them that suggests they are not on this pilgrimage to save their souls. This is especially true of the Wife of Bath. The Prioress, for example, states “God yeve this monk a thousand-last quad yeer! / A ha! Felawes! Beth ware of swiche a jape!” With these lines the Prioress is reprimanding the monk and making him submissive, similar to the mission of the Wife in all her relationships. The Nun, on the other hand, talks about job obligation, and what stands out is that when she talks about this, she uses the word ‘we’ to define them, an aspect that would not stand out if this was, in fact, a man, “For he, that with his thousand cords and sly / Continually awaits us all to trap, / When he a man in idleness may spy / He easily the hidden snare will snap, / And till the man has met the foul mishap, / Hes not aware the devil has him in hand; / We ought to work and idleness withstand”. This is also very powerful once again due to the audience of pilgrims she has.

One thing most readers can agree on is that the Wife lacks feminist expression (being controlled by emotion rather than desires: women are from Venus and men are from Mars), specifically in regard to the period she is living in, except the moment she finds out about her fourth husband having a lover on the side. Thus, during her prologue, she uses the traditional patriarchal expressions and ideas, but bends them to suit her own purpose. For example, in her argument about marriage being as important as virginity, she quotes St. Paul, who is the major male authority advocating abstinence. Also, a reason for not quoting women authorities might be because there are none to quote, and using male authorities to show the double standards in regard to women and men gives her a certain edge to the readers. Despite this, Chaucer does not fully commit to women’s rights, because it is obvious that the texts used by the Wife are unavailable to the uneducated Wife, and are only acquired knowledge from her husband’s reading. She is clearly incapable of reading the original texts for herself; otherwise, instead of using Jerome’s interpretation, she would use a source text that would impeach that interpretation.

After seeing the many examples that the Wife takes from the Bible to show us that there are no strict rules when it comes to marriage, we are reminded of the beginning of the prologue: “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right enough

for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage:’’; and see the wisdom of taking that with us into the tale. Experience is the central argument in the Tale, and the reader must understand the experience of the violent rage of women who are treated like goods. I would say that experience is the key to the Wife’s womanhood and is, in fact, the only way for men to understand her. Another viewpoint the Tale brings us is that men cannot understand what women want, desire, and wish for, except the ones that are re-educated through their own experience. This would be the case with Chaucer, himself, who was an educated layman, and lived and learned by his own experiences.

Perhaps this is why Chaucer is able to see past the Wife's struggle for dominance, to the signs of love-seeking. In a way, she wants to be treated as a lady, in a courtly manner, which she would then be willing to repay with respect and obedience, something she manages to do with Jankyn, the fifth husband that she does not ‘need’. She already has good social standing and enough money to be a very satisfied widow, and need no longer be subject to any man’s whim. In such a depiction of her final marriage, Chaucer shows his sympathy and understanding of what women need, and how complex their personalities are. There are sadly no sources that present Chaucer's personal views, but his choice of love, sex, and marriage, as a topic, and a very aggressive and bad-tempered character that is nevertheless shown to be likable, allows us to infer his true attitude to women and feminism.

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5. Conclusion

Chaucer uses sources of authority in a traditional, historical and social context that are viewed from both the arguments of the Narrator and the Wife in a period when women were either compared to the sinful Eve or the Virgin Mary. With these sources, Chaucer uses patriarchal writings such as the Church, St. Jerome, Walter Map, St. Paul and King Solomon. He uses them not only to reflect women's positions but also to show that women should be treated equally, and he proves to us that his writings are not only ahead of his time but that he is also creating the foundations of feminism. Courtly love literature that emphasizes chivalry, nobility and experience between erotic desire and spiritual attainment, are where Chaucer proved himself to be the Father of English literature.

Chaucer is best known for his writing of *The Canterbury Tales*, but also *The Legend of Good Women, The House of Fame* and *The Book of the Duchess*. His work was not only crucial as a great insight into the Middle Ages of religious controversies, reflections on social change and as a starting point of feminism, but also when it came to legitimizing the native tongue during a time when the dominant literary languages were Latin and French.

As this thesis mentions, there are truly three main sources that the Wife uses to prove that her lifestyle, appetite for pleasure and experience-filled life is in fact justified, and those are *St. Jerome's Adversus Jovinianum*, the Bible and Paul the Apostle. *St. Jerome’s Adversus Jovinianum*, disapproves the theory set forth by one Jovinianus that men should not marry and women should remain virgins. To take it even further, the Wife cites the Bible to prove that God has in fact asked us to multiply, fill the earth and rule over all its creatures. While using these sources we can be sure that she is not always interpreting the scriptures correctly, as she might tailor them to suit her own dilemmas. This is particularly true when the Wife refers to Paul the Apostle's view on marriage. Paul the Apostle wanted men and women to hold on to their innocence but was also aware of the fact that the human race is composed of sexual beings, so marriage in his mind is a better option than to burn with passion. With these sources, she supports her promiscuity and proves the gender double standards that are set in almost all literature.

Another main theme in this essay is the Wife's way of getting dominance in her relationships with her husbands. Her first three husbands were old and weak, thus making
them easy to dominate. The Wife managed this by accusing them of being disrespectful to her while drunk. Husband four was a bit more complicated, having a lover on the side and not bowing down to her authority as easily. In this case, she convinces him that she also has a lover and thus his jealousy literally drives him crazy. Her last and true final love, Jenkyn the misogynist, drives her to violence which in the end gives her the domination she has always wanted.

Thus Chaucer, overall, was an amazing writer who created, remarkably early, very crucial foundations for the thinking that has come to be known as feminism. By using patriarchal sources both for and against the Wife in a very witty and exciting way, he has shown us really how good he was. He was a writer fighting for gender equality in a time of misogyny, yet was honored and respected in such a way that he was buried in the poet's corner in Westminster Abbey and is called the Father of Literature.
Bibliography


