Proto-Feminist Chaucer

The Rivalry Between the Wife of Bath and the Clerk

BA Thesis in English

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May 2021
Abstract

This essay explores whether Geoffrey Chaucer should be considered a proto-feminist, focused primarily on “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” and “The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale”. The Wife of Bath, as this essay states, can arguably be considered a feminist character, based on modern definitions of feminism. However, the Clerk, and his Tale, are intrinsically opposed to the Wife of Bath, and can certainly not be considered a feminist text. This essay examines this juxtaposition between the Wife of Bath and the Clerk, and argues that the connection between these characters, and their Tales, is intentional on behalf of Chaucer, as a means to further his agenda to raise social awareness of the struggles of women in his society. This intentionality by Chaucer is also discussed, and is supported by evidence in the texts, but also evidence from other sources, such as his social position and personal experiences, both professionally and otherwise. Furthermore, a key component of the argument of his intentionality is his “Envoy de Chaucer”, a section of “The Clerk’s Tale”, in which Chaucer denounces the Clerk and his message about women, in favor of the Wife of Bath and her ideas on shared governance. This essay also addresses some of the criticism of the idea of Chaucer as a feminist, both directly, and the argument that the Wife of Bath, and Chaucer’s envoy is supposed to be satire and entirely ironic. Based on the evidence and evaluations of Chaucer’s intentionality behind these characters and their Tales, it becomes clear that Chaucer should indeed be considered a proto-feminist based not only on his words, but also on the simple fact that through his works he has made people consider women’s position in society, from the day The Canterbury Tales was published, to our modern post-feminist world.
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1 Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer is considered among the greatest English writers of all time, and his various works are still enjoyed and extensively studied to this day. His crowning achievement is widely considered to be *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the late 14th century, which consists of “The General Prologue” followed by a collection of prologues and tales told by a variety of characters. The limited information available to scholars on people in the Middle Ages makes it difficult to get any clear impression on the personalities of or attitudes those people. However, in Chaucer’s case there exists a reasonable amount of information on his life that might give indirect evidence of his character.

Chaucer was born in London, Circa 1342, to a prosperous vintner, John Chaucer. He is thought to have had formal Latin and legal education. Although Chaucer is considered middle-class, his social position was more complicated than that. According to the social class system of his time, Chaucer would technically be considered a part of the peasant class. However, it was during Chaucer’s lifetime that England saw the emergence of the middle-class. Chaucer can also be considered part of the nobility, since he had considerable favor with the kings, and powerful people of his time. He even worked with the Clergy when working on the restoration of Westminster and St George’s Chapel during his time as clerk of the King’s works (Galloway 18). Chaucer’s social standing is clearly rather complex and unique. He also held many different positions in his time. He was a soldier, a member of parliament for Kent, comptroller of customs in London, among various other positions (Carlson).

Chaucer’s diverse life experiences, moreover, could have helped him develop a feminist-like view of society. Chaucer’s first position was to be page to the Countess of Ulster, who likely helped Chaucer during his early years. Having a female patron so early in his career may have been important in his intellectual development (Wynne-Davies 1). He was all throughout his life connected with powerful women, Wynne-Davies saying he had a “network of feminine associations” (2). It is therefore possible to imagine Chaucer having considerable respect and admiration for these women, and consequently, women in general. This can arguably be viewed as evidence of Chaucer’s feminist values.
Some evidence from Chaucer’s works gives support to this idea. In particular, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” which is most often mentioned in that regard. Timothy Aubry says that it “reveals the realities of the treatment of women in a patriarchal society” (1). In the prologue Chaucer also goes against a long history of misogynistic writing, in part nurtured by the church (Greenblatt 282). Chaucer also wrote “The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale”, which in many ways is the opposite of “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” not only based on the contents of the stories, but also on the Wife’s and Clerk’s personalities, and the morals for which they stand. “The Clerk’s Tale” is unique in the Canterbury Tales, in that, in addition to the Tale, Chaucer includes his own thoughts on the issues presented in the Tale, in his “Envoy de Chaucer”, which appears at the end of the Tale.

This essay will consider how Chaucer juxtaposes the message of the Clerk’s Tale with the ideas held by the Wife of Bath, in order to create two opposing positions on social issues he would like to address, so that he can then side with the Wife of Bath in the “Envoy de Chaucer”, thus arguably making him a proto-feminist. To support this argument, I will first consider the feminist values found in the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”. Then I will examine how the Clerk can arguably be considered as the opposite of the Wife of Bath, and how “Clerk’s Tale” handles feminist, and social issues. Finally, the envoy will be evaluated, regarding sincerity on behalf of Chaucer, and the message supposedly being conveyed by Chaucer in it. The result of this will hopefully demonstrate Chaucer’s intentionality behind bringing these social issues to light, without alienating himself among his contemporaries in the process.
2 Wife of Bath’s Prologue

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue stands out from other prologues in *The Canterbury Tales* in being longer than the tale itself (862 lines vs. 407 lines respectively). The Prologue opens with the following words, which immediately give the reader an idea of the Wife of Bath’s personality:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in marriage; (1-3)

According to the Wife of Bath, it is her experience, and therefore knowledge and wisdom, rather than authority, that allow her to speak on the woes of marriage. Experience, in other words, is more important than authority. This viewpoint can be seen in almost all the arguments that the Wife of Bath makes in her Prologue, as well as in her Tale.

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue covers many topics, such as sexism and Church-sanctioned sexual repression, the importance of virginity, and shared governance. The Wife of Bath begins by talking about how it is frowned upon for women to have more than one husband in their lives. As she points out, Abraham and Jacob, along-side other holy men, had more than one wife (55-58). She also talks about the church’s view on virginity, and although she does agree that virginity has value, she does not believe that it is for everyone, since desire comes from God and therefore it cannot be a sin to experience sexual pleasure (77-104). She talks about her experience with her five husbands and mentions that husbands have a way of always seeing the worst in their wives (249-302). The largest section of her prologue concerns the Wife’s fifth husband, and his book of “wikked wyves” (685). She talks about how she has been able to control her previous husbands, either by her sexuality or wealth, but her fifth husband has been more difficult. However, after hitting her, almost to death, he finally surrenders to her will (627-828). This section of the prologue stands out from the rest and is the first clear instance of Chaucer’s apparent
fascination with the subject of shared governance, which is arguably the most important tenet of feminism.

2.1 Feminist Values in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue

There are many characteristics and instances of the Wife of Bath behaving like a feminist, even though at the time feminism did not really exist yet, at least not as it is understood today. The International Women’s Development Agency, or IWDA, defines feminism thus: “feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It’s about respecting diverse women’s experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realise their full rights” (IWDA). Based on this definition the Wife of Bath could certainly be considered a feminist. The Wife of Bath is of course just a character written by a man, whose intentions we simply do not know. Some scholars doubt Chaucer’s sincerity in setting up the Wife of Bath as someone to be respected. As McTaggart puts it, “is the Wife to be understood as a proto-feminist”, or “a delightful buffoon inadvertently lampooning herself for the ironic pleasure of a knowing, male audience”? (41). However, there are some arguments to be made for Chaucer’s sincerity. For example, it seems strange that Chaucer would spend so much time and effort crafting and conveying the arguments of the Wife so convincingly if he meant for her to be nothing more than satirical comic relief. In any case, it is safe to assume Chaucer’s intention for the reader is to at least consider the Wife of Bath’s position, even if he himself may not have had the same views on the subject.

As Evans and Johnson put it, the Wife of Bath states that experience is what gives her authority, thereby “reversing the hierarchy which devalues ‘feminine’ experience and privileges ‘masculine’ authority”. They also state that she also establishes that authority, based on experience, by referencing important medieval authorities and “refuses to be silenced by the patriarchal powers-that-be” (1). The Wife also displays her feminism when speaking about religion and the male authorities that guard the supposed meaning of the Bible. She also talks about the importance of virginity, and sexuality, pointing out that it is natural for both men and women to have sexual urges. And finally, she talks about her interest, or rather insistence, on shared governance. These ideas among others are the focus
of this chapter, in order to examine and determine if the Wife of Bath could be considered a feminist.

The Wife questions the interpretation of the Bible: “Men may divine and gosen up and down, / But wel I woot, expres, withouten lie, / God bad us for to wexe and multiplye” (26-28). Her claim is that while the men holding the authority on the Bible can interpret the text as much as they want, she still knows that she should be able to marry more than one person, since God commanded that people should multiply. She essentially disagrees with the authoritative readings on the Bible in favor of her own understanding of the text. The Wife’s idea contains intrinsic feminist values, as it promotes equal opportunity for women. In medieval England women were in general limited in how much they could study the Bible, making the Wife’s opinions even more groundbreaking. Phillippe of Navarre famously said, in a letter to his friend, on the education of women, “One should not teach a woman letters or writing unless she is a nun, because a woman’s reading and writing leads to great evil” (qtd. in Clabaugh 170). Derived from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, this way of thinking was common in medieval Christianity (Clabaugh 169-171). By disagreeing with the predominantly male authorities on the Bible, the Wife of Bath displays what could be considered a modern act of feminism. She uses her knowledge of the Bible to prove that women have the same capability as men to read and understand the Bible. The IWDA also says that a key component of feminism is to “empower all women to realise their full rights” (IWDA), and it can be argued that Chaucer does this by showing the reader that the Wife can in fact compete with authorities on the Bible on an intellectual level, and therefore possibly empowering women, and men, to break down the barriers against female education in Chaucer’s time.

When it comes to virginity, The Wife of Bath agrees with the Church that it signifies purity, but also argues that not everyone can be as pure as saints (106-109). According to Shulasmith Shahar, in Christianity, during the Middle Ages, chastity was not a necessity, but rather a sign of a greater devotion to Christianity (65). The wife goes on to talk about the purpose of genitals:

Telle me also, to what conclusion
Her argument is that God made men and women the way they are not only so they can dispose of waste, and have children, but also so that they may enjoy intercourse. This again shows Chaucer’s and the Wife of Bath’s empowerment for women, and in fact men as well, by claiming that sexuality and desire should not be considered a sin. In the same section she invokes marriage debt – a medieval doctrine that stated that married persons were expected to engage in intercourse. This debt was usually considered to be a debt a woman would owe her husband. However, the Wife talks about the debt her husband owes to her. This is a reversal of the normal gender dynamic usually found medieval literature, since she feels that her husband is obligated to bring his wife sexual pleasure. Ruth Karras, in her book *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, argues that medieval sexuality is heavily gendered, and that medieval people understood the act of intercourse as something that one-person does to another, instead of doing something together. She also argues that two people engaging in intercourse were not necessarily committing the same act, because for different genders the act has different implications (5). This leads back to the question of role reversal, since the Wife of Bath’s demand that a marriage debt should be paid by a husband to his wife makes the woman the active sexual partner. The right to equal sexual enjoyment is another factor in modern feminism. The Wife of Bath, and perhaps Chaucer, seem to be of that opinion as well.
Shared governance is another issue addressed by the Wife of Bath in her discussion of her fifth husband. Interestingly, Chaucer places the emphasis on the benefits of shared governance, rather than making it an issue of human rights. This becomes quite clear when comparing the Wife’s words with Chaucer’s words in the “Envoy de Chaucer” in “The Clerk’s Tale.” After talking about an instance when the Wife of Bath’s fifth husband hits her, she says, “Stibourne I was as is a leonesse, / And of my tonge a verray jangleresse” (643-44). She insists that even though he beat her badly, she was stubborn enough to still speak her mind. Chaucer addresses this in his envoy, saying, “lat noon humylit thee youre tonge naille” (1184). We can assume that in not holding her tongue she does what Chaucer deems right, that is, not succumb to female humility, but rather speak up for herself. It is easier to take Chaucer’s words as sincere, given his apparent interest in equality, than to imagine Chaucer thinking men should use physical violence to dominate women.

The Wife of Bath’s husband hits her again later, when she tears out pages from his favorite “book of wikked wyves”, but this time she falls to the ground, pretending to be dead. Overcome with guilt, he yields to her the governance in their marriage, after which their relationship improves drastically:

…he yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
To han the governance of hous and lond,
And of his tongue, and his hond also;…
…And that he saide, ‘myn owene trewe wif,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lif;
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estat,’
After that day we hadde nevere debat. (813-22)

Shared governance leads to happiness in marriage. This idea also features in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” in which the knight finds happiness only after he decides to share governance with his new wife. Moreover, shared governance arguably leads not only to
happiness in marriage, but to societal harmony. Chaucer himself apparently supports this notion in his “Envoy”, where he suggests that wives taking on governance “For commune profit … may availle” (1194). This notion that empowering women could lead to a better society can certainly be regarded as being a core feminist value.

There is clearly a strong connection between the Wife of Bath’s position and the modern idea of feminism. We can see this from the Wife’s insistence that male authority should not out-weigh her experience and knowledge. This is also clear from her arguments about sexuality. Most importantly, it is manifested by her insistence on shared governance between women and men, as opposed to, “the traditional medieval view, sanctioned by the church fathers and by common law, that wives should be humble, obedient and submissive to their husbands in all things” (Carruthers 209). Although Chaucer brings forth these ideas via the Wife of Bath, the connections between her ideas and his own words in the envoy suggest that Chaucer probably supported the feminist morality behind these claims.

2.2 Chaucer on Misogynistic Writing
One of the most significant indications of the Wife of Bath’s, and possibly Chaucer’s, proto-feminist views is her critique of the misogynistic culture of her society. For a woman to be talking so freely about these subjects in literature, in Chaucer’s time, would have been considered unusual. The medieval church had significant influence on the literary world, which is likely the cause of so much medieval literature being misogynistic, since many writers would draw upon the old tradition of men being superior to women (Greenblatt 282) and the Greco-Roman cultural notion of connecting femininity to weakness and sexual desire (Newman 22). Chaucer goes against that custom in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale.” Moreover, he also has the Wife of Bath criticize the misogynistic writing popular in his time.

The book of “wikked wyves” her fifth husband loved to read shows women betraying their husbands in horrible ways. However, Chaucer has the Wife dispute the misogynistic message behind this book. She claims that things would be different if women, not men, wrote books:
By God! if women hadden written stories,
As clerkes han within hir oratories,
They wolde han written of men more wikkednesse
Than al the merk of Adam may redresse. (699-702)

This shows the Wife’s resentment of this misogynistic writing style and, arguably, Chaucer’s dislike of it. *The Legend of Good Women*, a book written by Chaucer before *The Canterbury Tales*, can also serve as evidence for Chaucer’s dislike of misogynistic writing. In that book Chaucer tells the stories of powerful women betrayed by men throughout history. *The Legend of Good Women* is the opposite of the book of “wikked wyves”. The main source of dislike, on behalf of the reader, for the character of the fifth husband is allegedly his love of the book of “wikked wyves”. According to the Wife, “He knew of hem mo legends and lyves, / than been of goode wyves in the bible” (686-687). In light of Chaucer’s authorship of *The Legend of Good Women*, his use of this issue may indicate his dislike of the sort of books the fifth husband is so clearly interested in.
3 Wife of Bath’s Tale

“The Wife of Bath’s” Tale takes place in Arthurian England, which means it is the land of knights, chivalry and magic. The Tale focuses on a knight of King Arthur’s court, who at the beginning of the tale rapes a woman. By law, the knight is therefore to be beheaded. However, the Queen asks if his life may be spared, so that she and her ladies of the court might decide his fate. After the Queen’s request is granted, she tells the knight that he will be spared, if he can answer the question, “what thyng it is that wommen moost desiren” (905). The knight then goes on a journey to find the answer to that question. When he has little time left, he meets an old woman, who will give him the answer, so long as he does whatever she asks in return. The knight accepts and returns to the Queen with his answer, that women desire sovereignty above all else. The Queen accepts this answer and gives the knight his life. The old woman then asks the knight to honor his promise and marry her. Having promised to do whatever she asked of him, he agrees. On their wedding night the old woman gives him the power to choose whether she is to be old and faithful, or young and unfaithful. The knight tells her to decide, trusting in her judgement on the matter. As a reward for giving up his power, the old woman becomes both young and faithful. This leads them to live happily ever after, “And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye…” (1257-58).

3.1 The Rape

The knight’s predicament is predicated on his rape of a maiden which does raise the question of how a story can contain any feminist values if its conclusion is a “happily ever after” story about a rapist. However, the opposite can in fact be argued, that is, that Chaucer intentionally made this decision, of having the knight commit rape, to strengthen the notion of the knight’s change in attitude, from a rapist to a submissive person, from one extreme to the other. It is also worth noting that without the crime of rape, the King would arguably not have given power to the Queen to decide the knight’s fate, since the Queen’s motive would have been removed, due to her personal interest in this case, as a representative of the female gender. Therefore, if the knight had been something like a robber or murderer, the events of the Tale would not have made much sense. One could argue that the knight being a rapist does not take away from any feminist values found in the Tale, seeing as the
crime was likely, in Chaucer’s mind, a necessity for the Queen to take an interest in what happens to the knight, which leads the knight on his search for the answer to what women want, which just so happens to be somewhat opposite of rape, sovereignty.

Chaucer may also have chosen the crime of rape to symbolize the marriage debt. Chaucer is arguably further expanding on that issue here. Like the marriage debt, the knight thinks he can force himself on a woman, simply because he feels like it. However, similar to what happens in the Prologue, this dynamic gets turned on its head, since the knight is also forced to have sex at the end of the Tale. This is apt punishment for his crime, since he clearly does not want to perform his marriage debt. As he exclaims, “For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste! / Taak al my good and lat my body go” (1060-1061). This may not be comparable to the knight’s rape, but he is forced to fulfill his marriage debt. In conclusion, his crime is chosen to showcase his change of attitude, and consequently his change of fortune, after embracing shared governance. The protagonist finds happiness after letting go of his masculine dominance over women, in favor of a more submissive attitude and a newfound respect for women. The meaning behind this change is supposed to apply to society at large, if men were to realize that shared governance is beneficial.

3.2 Maistrie

The concept of maistrie, or mastery, is an important theme in both the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale. In the prologue the Wife’s fifth husband gives her power over herself, himself, and their estate as well. However, the tale shows other instances of characters giving up power or surrendering themselves to the will of others, always to the opposite gender. First, the King gives the Queen power to decide what will happen to the knight, then she sends the knight on his quest to discover what women want. The knight also gives his new wife the “maistrie” in their relationship:

… Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the wheither of the two,
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.

‘Thanna have I gete of yow maistrie’, quod she,

‘Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?’

‘ye, certes, wyf,’ quod he, ‘I holde it best’. (1232-1238)

Shortly after this conversation between the knight and his new wife, in which he gives her mastery over him, she seemingly gives the control right back to him: “And she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or liking” (1255-56). These examples, together with the Prologue, show Chaucer’s interest in the transfer of power between the sexes as well as the benefits of shared governance. The person who gives up mastery to a person of the opposite gender always ends up better off than they were before, which would indicate Chaucer’s intention of arguing for the social liberties of women.

Chaucer’s interest in this subject may stem from the influence of strong women in his own life. He knew and was affected by a great deal of very powerful women in his time, for example, the Countess of Ulster, whom he probably respected and admired and who would have had mastery over Chaucer himself. It is possible Chaucer is in fact making a point about the role of women in society via the Wife of Bath. As Karras writes about the roles men and women in Chaucer’s time, “Men were certainly in the dominant position in marriage. However, despite the legal superiority of the husband, medieval Christian society did not expect or want women to be doormats. The marital relationship was not generally one of equal partners, but it was not generally one of master and slave either” (87). Chaucer was involved with many women, who were much more powerful than himself. He had also received patronage from some of these women. It is therefore possible that Chaucer favored a model of shared governance. The parallel endings of the Prologue and of the Tale, are another sign of Chaucer’s deep interest in this issue. Even though it is possible that the Wife projects her own experience into her story, Chaucer’s intention to draw the reader’s attention to this issue is unmistakable.

“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” features the common medieval motif of the loathly lady. Stories that follow this motif usually contain a character who is an old and unattractive
woman, referred to as a *hag*. However, in the middle ages it became more common for them to transform into young and beautiful women (Bollard 1). Bollard argues that the Wife of Bath’s Tale differs from other loathly lady stories, since usually it is a matriarchal figure, that breaks the spell and turns the hag into a beautiful woman. In the Wife of Bath’s Tale, it is instead a direct consequence of the knight giving *maistrie* to the hag, which allows her to transform into the beautiful woman. The fact that Chaucer’s loathly lady figure gains her sovereignty from a man, rather than the usual matriarch, does pose the question of whether this is Chaucer symbolizing men granting sovereignty to women in general. If so, this would then be compelling evidence for Chaucer’s interest in some sort of social change in his society.

### 3.3 Feminist Values in the Wife of Bath’s Tale

“The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” much like the prologue, promotes feminist values. The most important one is shared governance and its benefits to society, which is also a major theme in the Prologue. However, in the Tale, Chaucer also explores the diverse experiences of women, thus challenging certain stereotypes about women in the middle ages, such as women being the source of evil (Clabaugh 169-171). There is also, according to Chaucerian scholar Emma Lipton, an implied call to activist feminism in the Tale, regarding the knight’s sentence, and subsequent conclusion of the story, in which the knight does in fact find out what women want, and therefore has a new-found respect for women. As I suggested above, the fact that the knight’s crime does not receive the traditional punishment does not make the story lose its feminist values. From a different perspective, Lipton argues that the decision to make the knight seek an answer to what women want is a means to educate rather than punish the knight, presenting an alternative legal system which allows for social change, rather than stagnancy: “The tale does not solve the problem of justice posed by the rape, but rather explores how legal practice might be deployed for continuing activism” (336). Moreover, in the end the knight has supposedly been educated on social morality, evident from his decision to give the hag the choice of being loyal or beautiful.

In the Middle Ages, courts had no female judges, which alone makes the premise of the Tale unique. Moreover, the Queen and her ladies’ interest in deciding the fate of the
knight could well be considered a form of activism, seeing as they seem to be determined to make significant changes to the function of the court. They do this by transforming it from being a “means of retribution to becoming an institutionalized model for systemic social change” (Lipton 340). This can be further supported by examining the feminist legal scholar Ann Scales’s argument on the application of laws for the betterment of society. She argues that the goal of legal feminism is to be “result-oriented” and argues that “if society is not getting positive results from law as it is, society needs to rewrite or reinterpret the law” (88). This is exactly what the Queen does in her judgement of the knight’s crime: instead of giving him the traditional capital punishment, she reinterprets the law to “be deployed as an agent of systemic social change” (Lipton 345).

During his travels, the knight gets many diverse answers to the question of what it is that women want, such as, wealth, honor, happiness and to be attended and cared for (925-948). The variety of answers speaks to one of the pillars of feminism according to the IWDA, that society needs to respect women’s diverse experiences and identities. In the context of medieval stereotypes about women, this passage promotes individuality in the perception of women and helps to stop the objectification of women, a likely cause of the knight’s rape of the maiden. One lady states, “We wol been holden wise and cleene of synne” (944), countering the medieval stereotype, pushed by the Church, of women as the source of evil and sin (Clabaugh 169-171). It further shows Chaucer’s interest in, and understanding of, this issue.

This diversity also serves to break down certain perceptions of gender in the context of separating masculine and feminine genders from their biological sex. Some women pursue more feminine desires, such as flattery and courtship: “Somme seyde that oure hertes been moost esed / Whan that we been yflatered and ypleased” (929-930). Interestingly, the Wife uses the pronoun “we”, thus including herself in the collective women that are addressing the knight, inscribing herself in the story. But the Wife also suggests that some women express more masculine desires. They want to be free and do as they please, and they wish that no man will reprove them for their vices; they also argue that women should not be considered submissive and nice, but rather intelligent and someone to be reckoned with (935-938). According to the IWDA, all genders should have equal rights and opportunities. One might expect the Wife would refrain from including
more feminine aspects of the gender spectrum, but the fact she is inclusive of both masculine and feminine women makes for an even stronger argument for the existence of feminist values in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” even based on modern standards concerning gender.

In conclusion, much like in the Prologue, the Tale promotes feminism, even by modern standards. For Chaucer’s time the work is quite progressive in terms of its feminist values, although it is possible to argue that it is nothing more than satire, as McTaggart suggests may be the case (41). The Prologue and Tale can be humorous at times, but the level of understanding, and personal interest, in the struggles of women displayed by Chaucer suggests that this is more than satire. Whether this is satire, or a serious attempt to address the problems women face in Chaucerian society, is in fact relative to the perspective of the reader. One could argue that based on Chaucer’s own experiences with female authority figures, and his works such as The Legend of Good Women, as well as his insight on the diversity of gender, Chaucer does in fact want his work to have a lasting impact on society, or at the very least, make people consider the social position of women. Perhaps what can be seen as satire is simply a means to cloak Chaucer’s attempt at improving society.
4 Clerk’s Prologue
“The Clerk’s Prologue” is considerably shorter than “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” being only 56 lines. It starts off with the Host asking the Clerk to tell a tale, but not one that preaches, or makes people sad, but rather something enjoyable. The tale that follows, at least to a modern reader, is more shocking than fun. The Clerk then goes on to credit Petrarch for the story he will tell, and the tale is indeed derived from Petrarch’s *Historia Griseldis* (1373), in turn inspired by Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1352) (Morgan 2).

The order of tales in *The Canterbury Tales* is still a mystery. As Jarome Mandel says, “whatever plans Chaucer had for organizing the individual tales into a coherent work died with him…” (13). The order regarding the Wife of Bath and the Clerk is somewhat disputed, but the two are undeniable linked to each other, as John Alford puts it, “Neither the Wife nor the Clerk can be understood in isolation from each other. They are a pair” (108). The following chapters will read the two tales in juxtaposition and consider if Chaucer uses the parallel to strengthen a feminist moral position.

4.1 The Clerk and the Wife of Bath
The Wife of Bath and the Clerk are fundamentally opposed in their appearance, economic status, personality, and position on gender roles. Alford calls them “mirror opposites” (109). In the General Prologue is where we first see this glaring juxtaposition of the Wife and the Clerk. Chaucer describes the Wife of Bath as wearing elaborate and rich clothing, “Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed, / Ful strite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe” (456-457), while describing the Clerk’s dress as “Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy” (290). Chaucer also contrasts their economic positions: He implies the Wife is well-off with the description of her dress, but also in her success as a cloth-maker, “Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt” (447-448), but the Clerk “… hadde he but litel gold in cofre” (298). Chaucer also mentions their personalities, speaking of the Wife as social and out-going, and the Clerk as a recluse.

However, the most notable difference between them is their position on the role of women in society. The Wife of Bath takes a rather progressive stand with her claims on misogyny and inequality in society. The Clerk’s position is much more traditional. He
thinks that wives should be submissive in marriage. The Clerk answers the Wife of Bath with his tale and uses it to counter her ideas. These differences make it difficult to determine which of these positions Chaucer agrees with. This is perhaps the reason Chaucer includes his “Envoy de Chaucer”, in which he goes against the Clerk’s position, in favor of the Wife of Bath.
5 Clerk’s Tale

The Clerk’s Tale takes place in Italy, in Saluces, where Walter is the marquee and lord of the land. One day his people approach him, with the hopes that they might convince him to take a wife, so an heir can be produced. Walter, who values his freedom, is hesitant to accept his people’s plea. He accepts nonetheless but declines their offer to select a suitable wife for him, possibly because he wants a wife he can control, and chooses Griselda. Although she is from the poorest family in the village, Griselda is young, beautiful, and virtuous; she is a hard worker and takes great care of her father. Her father agrees to the marriage, but Walter makes Griselda promise to always be completely obedient and never to show displeasure to any decision he makes. Griselda agrees to this and they get married. They live happily for a while, and Griselda becomes famous for her virtue, grace and goodness. However, Walter is not as sure as everyone else about Griselda’s virtues and decides to test her loyalty. He makes her think that he has ordered the death of their daughter. Remaining perfectly obedient, Griselda lets Walter’s sergeant take their daughter away, thinking that she would be killed. After some time, still not sure of his wife’s obedience, Walter does this again, this time with their son, and again Griselda does not show any sign of displeasure. Finally, Walter informs Griselda that he is going to take a new wife. He not only sends her back to her father in nothing but a smock, but has Griselda supervise the preparations for his next wedding. Griselda wishes Walter and his new wife well, and at this point Walter reveals to her that all the cruelties were simply to test her womanhood. The girl he was going to marry is in fact their daughter, and Griselda is still his wife. Griselda is relieved, and they live happily ever after. There ends the tale, except for closing words from the Clerk, as well as the envoy of Chaucer. In the envoy, Chaucer speaks directly to the reader, saying that “Griselda is dead, and also her patience” (1177). He goes on to explain that women should not strive to be like Griselda, as well as delivering a few lines of advice to women, in how they should act, regarding their husbands, and men in general.

5.1 Walter’s Sovereignty

Sovereignty, an important theme for the Wife of Bath, is continued in “The Clerk’s Tale”. Walter expresses concern about how marriage might affect his sovereignty, saying that he
believes it will turn his freedom into servitude. Walter fears that he might marry someone of the Wife of Bath’s disposition, that will gradually demand sovereignty of him. However, a wise man, chosen to speak to the marquee about marriage, knows Walter’s apprehension and explains that marriage is defined by sovereignty, not servitude:

Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok
Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse,
Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok. (133-135)

Although Walter agrees to get married, he thinks he must “...forgoon [his] libertee” (171), indicating he still believes marriage is a loss of sovereignty. The results of his fears are the cruelties he inflicts on Griselda. The wise man arguably represents society and its norms. He is voicing the fact that even in marriage Walter will retain his power. Walter is still unsure about this and starts to test Griselda. Eventually the wise man is proven right, since Griselda never breaks her promise and is completely obedient to Walter. Griselda staying true to her word demonstrates two things. First, that she is more honorable and a better person than Walter. Her steadfastness in her determination to keep her promise shows her in a positive light, and arguably gives her a certain degree of power over Walter, since he utterly fails in his attempts to break her. Secondly, her submissiveness can hardly be considered a role-model for feminist characters; however, in the context of Chaucer using this story to contrast the Wife of Bath’s position, only later to refute the Clerk, makes this story crucial in Chaucer’s attempt to raise his reader’s awareness of these issues. Moreover, this story can arguably be said to be a sort of what not to do scenario, judging by Chaucer’s words in the envoy.

The relationship between Griselda and Walter is of course not an accurate representation of a medieval marriage; however, men did in fact have both a legal, and social superiority over women (Karras 87). This is supported by Walter’s words:

I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
But for t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede (1073-75)

Walter’s words imply that womanhood is defined by obedience. Griselda’s womanhood is also considered and tested by men. This goes against the Wife of Bath, not only because she would certainly not agree with the premise, but also since she continually questions patriarchal authority, which in this case is defining womanhood. Chaucer has intentionally set up this situation, which would infuriate the Wife of Bath. Chaucer denounces the Clerk in his envoy; therefore, one could argue that this line of thinking would have infuriate Chaucer as well.

Griselda’s submissiveness throughout her marriage with Walter confirms the patriarchal society projected by the wise man. As stated before, the wise man represents society, as he is supposed to be intelligent, and is chosen by the people to represent them when talking to the lord. As a representation of society, he predicted that Griselda would remain loyal and submissive, which is confirmed by Walter’s tests. This can arguably be seen as Chaucer’s attempt to show the reader what he thinks about his own society. Chaucer implies in his envoy that women should not strive to be like Griselda. This shows Chaucer intention of this story being a warning to women of the expectations of people like Walter, and perhaps a warning as to the values of society itself.

5.2 Chaucer’s Social Equality of the Classes

“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and “The Clerk’s Tale” share one important theme, the concept of “gentillesse” being derived from God, meaning it is intrinsically human, rather than coming from lineage, wealth, and nobility. This theme is crucial for understanding Chaucer’s intentions regarding morality in these stories. It offers an insight into Chaucer’s perception of his society.

In the Wife of Bath’s Tale, after the knight and the old woman are wed, the knight expresses his remorse over her being “so lough a kynde” (1101). The old woman then proceeds with her monologue on how one obtains “gentillesse”, which can be defined as
nobility of character, the qualities of goodness, kindness, and virtue, but which is also often associated with noble birth. Chaucer allocates 103 lines in the Tale for this discussion, which is about one-tenth of the entire Tale, indicating his interest in this topic. As the old woman explains,

But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse
As is descended out of old richesse,
That therfore sholden ye be gentil men,
Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.
Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he kan;
Taak hym for the grettest gentil man.
Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,
Nat of oure elders for hire old richesse. (1109-1118)

She—and possibly Chaucer—believes that “gentillesse” characterizes peoples of all classes and comes from “gentil dedes” and being “vertuous” both in “pryvee and apert”, rather than from people’s linage, and old riches.

This theme is continued in “The Clerk’s Tale,” where Walter says that children do not always possess the same worthiness as their elders, and stating that, “Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen” (157). Later in the Tale the Clerk says that Griselda’s father is the poorest man in the village; however, “But hye God sometyme senden kan / His grave into a litel oxes stalle” (206-207). The text further suggests that being poor can in fact increase one’s virtue, as seen in the case of Griselda:

But for to speke of vertuous beautee,
Thanne was she oon the faireste under the sonne;
For povrliche yfostred up was she,
No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.
Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese. (211-217)

The Clerk, or rather Chaucer, argues that not only can someone possess “gentilesse” even if they belong to the peasant class, but that it can be strengthened due to the hardships associated with being a peasant. The idea of being corrupted by riches could be Chaucer’s attempt to criticize the nobility, and the notion that peasants can be just as noble and virtuous as the nobility, can also be considered a representation of Chaucer’s personal views on society. This idea is further explored later in the text. When Walter tests Griselda for the third time, he says that he will leave her for another woman, citing the main reason being that the people of his land want an heir of higher lineage. Even Griselda’s father says that he, from the beginning, thought that Walter would leave Griselda. The narrator says about her father, “hym wolde thynke it were a disparage / To his estaat so lowe for t’alighte” (908-909). Even the villagers, who before seemingly loved Griselda, think Walter wise when they see his supposed new bride, saying that their children would be fairer, and more pleasing, because of this new bride’s high lineage. However, after Walter’s big reveal, the narrator says this about Walter’s view on this issue, “and for he saugh that under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid…” (425-426).

Chaucer is clearly interested in this issue, evidenced by his excessive usage of this topic as a theme for both the Wife of Bath’s Tale and the Clerk’s Tale. It can be argued that this interest is one among many topics, concerning social issues relating to equality, which is an overarching theme across both Prologues and Tales, along-side the envoy, in question. This interest can also serve to give us a better understanding of Chaucer as a person, and from that we can assume intention on his behalf, presented in the morality of these texts. Furthermore, based on his personal experience with this topic, his sincerity on the issue can
be presumed, and if we are to assume his sincerity, one could argue that it strengthens the argument for his sincerity regarding the feminist issues he addresses, given that it would be rather peculiar if his stance on one of these social equality issues was sincere, but completely ironic on another.
6 Envoy de Chaucer

The “Envoy de Chaucer” is supposedly Chaucer’s commentary on the Clerk’s tale. The following chapters will consider a number of issues concerning the “Envoy de Chaucer” in its relation to Chaucer’s feminism. First, I will examine the position of the envoy within the tale and the identity of the speaker. My next consideration is the sincerity of the envoy, for some argue the envoy is satirical. Lastly, based on the assumption that Chaucer is the speaker in the envoy, and it is not entirely satirical, this essay will analyze Chaucer’s words concerning the moral of the story and his advice to women and discuss whether this has any bearing on Chaucer’s stance as a proto-feminist.

“The Envoy de Chaucer” is appended to “The Clerk’s Tale.” Although its position in the Tale is contested, this essay uses the Ellesmere manuscript, which places the envoy directly after the Host’s stanza, and ends with “heere endeth the tale of the Clerk of Oxenford”. Other popular manuscripts such as Hengwrt’s manuscript, places the envoy after “heere endeth the tale of the Clerk of Oxenford.” However, in both manuscripts the Clerk’s final line tells his audience to now listen to his song, which leads into the envoy, which raises the question, is it Chaucer or the Clerk who speaks in “Envoy de Chaucer”? The name would suggest it is Chaucer, but the Clerk’s final lines seem to indicate that it is him speaking in the envoy. Kittredge saw the envoy as pure drama, and contributes the lines to the Clerk, rather than Chaucer (199). However, Chickering argues that Chaucer is obviously fascinated by the Wife of Bath, and the subject of female authority, and therefore one might ascribe the feelings behind the envoy to Chaucer, whether he is the speaker or not (360). Malone also says that, based on the General Prologue, “the new ending does not fit the character of the Clerk, into whose mouth it is put… …This ending is Chaucer pure and simple, naked and unashamed.” (225). The following arguments are based on the claim that regardless of who the speaker is, it is Chaucer’s message in the envoy.

6.1 Satire and Irony in Chaucer’s Envoy

Many Chaucer scholars agree that the envoy is inherently ironic. Kittredge calls the envoy “mordant irony” (199-200), Windeatt says the envoy urges women to terrorize their husbands (202), and Salter says that the envoy is designed to release laughter which the tale
has suppressed (65-66). However, one could argue, based on all the indications of Chaucer’s interest in shared governance, that Chaucer himself would not have agreed with the moral of “The Clerk’s Tale”. Therefore, it is possible that Chaucer asserts his own thoughts on the issue via his envoy. People of the Middle Ages were also uncomfortable with Walter’s brutalities (Mann 114). It is therefore possible to assume that Chaucer added the envoy to show the reader he did not agree with the moral of the Tale. According to Farrell, “many critics saw the ‘Envoy’ as Chaucer’s personal attempt to distance himself from the supposed monstrosity and barbarity of the tale and its moral” (329).

The assumption that the envoy is ironic and satirical is largely based on the following exaggerated descriptions of women torturing men:

For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille,

The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence

Shal perce his his brest and eek his aventaille.

In jalousie I rede eek thou hym brynde,

And thou shalt make hym couche as doth a quaille. (1202-1206)

In the last two lines Chaucer describes a rather colorful scene, depicting a woman who has bound up her husband and makes him cower like a scared, trapped animal. There are two ways of looking at this scene: as a comedy or as a striking image of female domination. Regardless of how each reader perceives this, Chaucer nevertheless suggests that women should behave rather brutishly. It is worth mentioning that, as a poet, Chaucer may not mean this literally, but rather gives this extreme example to further emphasize his position of equal rights, and that women should stand up for themselves. Moreover, even if this does seem extreme, if we consider the context behind his advice, it becomes more reasonable. This advice is given not to all women, but women in Griselda’s position. Given that very few women, or men, would act the way Griselda does, but are nevertheless still subjected to all sorts of physical or psychological abuse by their spouses, in a patriarchal, male
dominated society, Chaucer’s advice becomes much more acceptable. One can therefore argue that this is not ironic, even if Chaucer did perhaps intend for this to be humorous.

6.2 Chaucer’s Advice to Women and Endorsement of the Wife of Bath
This chapter considers the function of Chaucer’s envoy in the text. I will argue that Chaucer uses the Clerk’s Tale as a tool, via his envoy, to support the Wife of Bath and to tear down patriarchal morality represented by the Clerk; that Chaucer thinks women should not be humble or submissive; and that Chaucer’s use of dominance and violence by women in the envoy is purely metaphorical, a means towards equal rights, rather than a call to supplant patriarchy with matriarchy.

As established in chapter 4, the Wife of Bath and the Clerk are clearly linked and are also completely opposite from each other. The question then becomes, why has Chaucer created these two characters with opposite appearance, personalities, and values, and why has he given them two Tales that seemingly have opposing morals behind them? This essay would suggest that this is intentional, with a specific agenda behind it. Chaucer first introduces the Wife of Bath and her values as a feminist (by modern standards). He then introduces the Clerk as the antithesis of the Wife and gives him the role of an anti-feminist. At this point Chaucer has presented two different viewpoints, and the reader is left with no indication of what Chaucer’s position is on this issue. However, after presenting these two sides, Chaucer inserts himself into the story via the envoy and takes sides. In the envoy he denounces the Clerk in favor the Wife, saying, “Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence / To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille” (1185-1186). Chaucer siding with the Wife of Bath in this manner, by giving his own opinion on the issue, can certainly serve as evidence of his intention to challenge the patriarchal society in which he lived. However, even if Chaucer did not consciously do this, it can still be read this way. Much like his sincerity in creating the Wife as a feminist, it is based on the perspective of the reader whether this is read as an honest attempt to address social issues, or simply satire. It is also worth pointing out that no other tale includes an “envoy”. “The Man of Law’s Tale”, “The Merchant’s Tale”, and “The Nun’s Tale” all end with an epilogue which contains closing words from
the Host, all lighthearted and humorous; however, none of these epilogues is in Chaucer’s voice, nor do they have a serious note along-side its humor.

Chaucer uses the envoy not only to denounce the Clerk, but also gives his advice to women regarding their humility and submission. It can be argued that the entire envoy is predicated on that underlying message; however, there are a few specific lines that address this plainly. One of the most striking examples of this is found in the lines, “O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence, / Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille” (1183-84). Chaucer begins by calling the wives he is addressing prudent, further illustrating that he is talking primarily to submissive women in Griselda’s position. Moreover, being submissive, a stereotypical feminine personality trait, can arguably be considered a form of humility, and it is precisely humility that Chaucer is encouraging women to cast aside, in times when they are being treated like Griselda, and to speak their mind, instead of remaining passive in the face of adversity. Given the medieval, and certainly the modern, readers’ aversion to Walter’s actions, we can assume Chaucer’s sincerity in this advice to women. This alone would not make him a feminist, but it can be considered further evidence of his agenda behind the Wife, the Clerk and the envoy. Moreover, three out of the six stanzas in the envoy are dedicated, in a way, to women speaking their mind. Chaucer also says, “Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence, / but evere answereth at the countretaille” (1189-90). The emphasis on women not staying silent is telling given the connection between the Wife of Bath and the envoy. The Wife seems to be an example of someone following the advice of Chaucer’s envoy. She starts out being passive in marriage, and not very happy, until later when she refuses to stay silent about the book of “wikked wyves,” which results in her having governance over her fifth husband, ultimately leading to their shared happiness in marriage.

The most progressive lines in the envoy, or perhaps in the entire Canterbury Tales, echo the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale in suggesting that shared governance can be beneficial and lead to happiness in marriage for both men and women:

Beth nat bidaffed for youre innocence,
But sharply taak on yow the governaille.
Emprenteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde,  
For commune profit sith it may availle. (1191-94)

Chaucer begins by saying that women should not let their humility be used against them, to take advantage of them. In the next line he encourages them to take control of their own lives, and presumably, to be more assertive. The “lessoun” is the same lesson mentioned earlier—that women should speak their minds and not let their prudence stop them from expressing themselves. The last line here is by far the most interesting, since it addresses an important question: is shared governance, between husband and wife, and by extension, between men and women in general, an overall positive thing for society? This may seem obvious to a modern reader, but in Chaucer’s time this is far from obvious. As already established in 3.1, men and women were not equal in marriage, nor in society in general (Karras 87). Chaucer, with the Wife of Bath, suggests, that shared governance is in fact beneficial to at least the relationships in question. Interestingly, even though the envoy is very upfront about its supposed message, Chaucer still chooses to use the word “may” in line 1994. By posing it as a possibility of what may happen, rather than a fact, he invites the reader to think this matter over themselves. It can be argued that by doing it this way, he further shows his sincerity. Had he intended for the envoy to be a mockery of the Wife of Bath, and women like her, he would have stated this as a matter of fact rather than a possibility. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that even if Chaucer did not intend on being a feminist, or to promote feminist values, he still has been very successful in doing so, given that still to this day people debate his validity as a proto-feminist, and it is reasonable to assume, that it got people of his day talking about these issues as well.

The advice Chaucer gives to women in the envoy may appear to be hyperbolic and violent, and to some it might seem like a declaration of war on behalf of women, against the patriarchy. Some lines, such as “And thou shalt make hym couche as doth a quaille”(1206) and “And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille”(1212), suggest that Chaucer is either being ironic, as discussed in 6.1, or is urging women to violence. However, neither of these intentions are true, Chaucer’s words here are not a literal call to arms, but rather a metaphorical and social call to arms, empowering women, and men
alike, not to force one gender into submission, but rather to embrace a model of shared governance. Chaucer uses this hyperbolic style to represent, not what women should do to men, but rather what men have been doing to women for centuries. Therefore, forcing the male reader to consider a life of being a second-class citizen, living under a female dominated matriarchy, is a means to raise the public’s awareness of the inequality that resides within Chaucer’s society.
7 Chaucer’s Feminism

As established, the Wife of Bath herself could arguably be considered a feminist. Moreover, according to Greene and Khan, the duty of feminist scholarship is to deconstruct male cultural paradigms, and reconstruct female perspectives and experiences, and to eradicate the imbalance between the sexes that has silenced and marginalized women for centuries (1). “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” fits this definition of a feminist text. The Prologue sees the Wife attempt to deconstruct the patriarchal systems of authority. The Wife is also steadfast in her belief that experience is more important than authority. Moreover, at the beginning of the women’s movement in 1960s a feminist novel could only be considered as such if it featured a liberated female character who breaks free of her traditional feminine role, or if the text makes the reader consider the negative effects of patriarchal culture (Moran 89). Based on these descriptions there can be little doubt that “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”, as a work of literature, can and should be considered a feminist work.

“The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale” is the opposite of the Wife of Bath, both in the personalities of their speakers and the supposed meaning behind their stories. Griselda is not a liberated character, nor does she break free of her feminine stereotype, and she certainly does not seek, as a character or otherwise, to eradicate any imbalance between the sexes. “The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale”, can therefore certainly not be considered a feminist piece of work. In fact, the Clerk’s Tale does the exact opposite of what constitutes a feminist work. And as this essay would argue, this is done intentionally by Chaucer, so he can refute it later in his envoy, which he without question does. The only question is, is it sincere? There exists no definitive way to prove his intentions. But this essay would argue that the satirical nature of the envoy is only a means to avoid the condemnation of the patriarchal society in which he lives, and it is more than likely that Chaucer’s opinions expressed in the envoy are his own. Moreover, even if all that is covered in this essay, that would paint Chaucer as a proto-feminist was false, he would still fulfill the requirements of feminist critics idea of what makes a feminist work of literature, in the sense that, his works, irrefutably makes people consider women’s place in society, regardless of whether or not he believes the morality presented by the Wife of Bath and himself, in the envoy, ultimately making Chaucer a proto-feminist, with or without his consent.
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