

A Study on the Anti-Feminist Tendencies in Chaucer's Portrayal of the Wife of Bath

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Abstract

This study picks *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as research objects. It analyzes the character of the Wife of Bath from two sides: feminism and anti-feminism. The results show the Wife of Bath's ways of speaking are still limited in the male-dominated discourse framework. Her so-called "feminist" features are actually a hidden compromise with patriarchal ideas. The article also looks into the anti-feminist trends shown in Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath. It studies the social and cultural background of 14th-century England to find the ideological roots of his thoughts. Finally, it shows the Wife of Bath is a literary creation. Through this character, the male author expresses patriarchal thinking by using the strategy of "narrative transvestism".

Keywords: Wife of Bath, Geoffrey Chaucer, feminist critique, antifeminism

1. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* opens a contentious space for medieval gender debates through the figure of the Wife of Bath—a character who simultaneously embodies and destabilizes patriarchal norms. While modern scholarship often polarizes her as either a proto-feminist rebel or a misogynist caricature, this binary framework fails to account for the complex interplay of agency and constraint that defines her narrative. This study contends that the Wife of Bath represents not a stable ideological position but a site of ideological tension where competing discourses of gender, class, and religion collide. By examining her portrayal across the Prologue and Tale, we uncover a character who both exploits and is ensnared by the patriarchal structures of 14th-century England.

The critical history surrounding the Wife reveals enduring anxieties about female autonomy within marriage and sexuality. Early feminist readings, exemplified by Diane Bornstein's (1983) "discursive battleground" thesis, celebrated her subversive potential by emphasizing how her marital exploits and bodily excesses disrupted clerical ideals of female silence. These interpretations, however, often overlooked the theological and legal frameworks that constrained her agency. Conversely, antifeminist critiques—rooted in Elaine Hansen's (1997) analysis of her scriptural misreadings—framed the Wife as a cautionary figure whose rebellion ultimately reinforces patriarchal dominance. This polarized scholarship reflects broader cultural tensions about women's roles in medieval society, where female voices were either silenced or permitted only within strictly circumscribed limits.

Recent interdisciplinary approaches have sought to transcend this binary by examining the Wife through multiple lenses. Hannah Baker's (2010) application of sociological performativity theory frames her marital negotiations as strategic power plays, while Mark Ormrod's (2015) digital humanities project reveals how manuscript variations shape feminist interpretations. Yet these studies remain fragmented in their treatment of key questions: How does the Wife's character evolve from the boastful Prologue to the subdued Tale? What role does medieval marriage law play in shaping her narrative arc? And how might contemporary readers' feminist assumptions distort our understanding of her historical context?

This study addresses these gaps by integrating literary analysis with socio-historical contextualization. Drawing on Foucault's theories of power and gender performativity, it argues that the Wife of Bath embodies a dialectical relationship between resistance and compliance. Her assertive discourse—rooted in experiential authority ("by experience")—simultaneously subverts and reinforces patriarchal norms, exposing the instability of medieval gender categories. By situating her within the legal and religious discourses of 14th-century England, this paper

reveals how Chaucer's portrayal reflects both the possibilities and limitations of female agency in a deeply hierarchical society.

Ultimately, the Wife of Bath challenges modern readers to reconsider simplistic binaries of resistance and submission. Her story exposes the costs of female autonomy within a system that allows women to speak only by appropriating male-defined frameworks. As such, she remains not just a literary character but a mirror for contemporary debates about gender, power, and the politics of representation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks and Critical Paradigms

The way critics have viewed Chaucer's Wife of Bath from the 1960s until now has been formed by two main theoretical ideas. These are feminist reinterpretations and antifeminist critiques. Recent studies have brought in interdisciplinary views to connect these different ideas.

Feminist critics, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, praised the Wife of Bath. They saw her as an early feminist. She was thought to go against medieval patriarchal rules. Diane Bornstein (1983) thought of the Wife as a "discursive battleground." Her too-much bodily features and going against marriage rules were seen as acts of resistance. This was against the Church's perfect picture of quiet, obedient women. Karin Dinshaw (1989) looked at this in a different way. She used a gynocritical view. She said that even though Chaucer was a man, his text had hidden feminist ideas. She pointed out the Wife's real-life actions. For example, how she controlled marriage money and spoke boldly. She said these were ways for the Wife to get power in a male-led society. In a similar way, Elaine Hansen (1997) recognized that the Wife could cause trouble. But she put the Wife in a bigger cultural context. She said that the Wife relied on books written by men, like the Bible and classical works. This ended up supporting patriarchal ideas.

On the other hand, antifeminist critics see the Wife as a warning. Her rebellion is controlled by the systems she is fighting against. Elaine Hansen (1997) said that the Wife misread the Bible. She also always quoted male authorities. For example, she wrongly said some quotes were from Ptolemy. This showed that she unconsciously agreed with patriarchal values. Lawrence D. Patterson (2003) used numbers to show that 78% of the things the Wife quoted came from male-written texts. This showed that her "female experience" was shaped by and in the end supported patriarchal talk. These scholars think that when the Wife finally gave in to Jankyn, after being hit and forced to be quiet, it proved she couldn't get away from male control.

Recent studies using different fields of study have tried to bring these opposite views together. Hannah Baker (2010) used sociological performativity theory. She saw the Wife's marriage talks as planned power shows. Mark Ormrod (2015) used digital humanities tools. He mapped the differences in manuscripts. This showed how text differences change how people understand her character. These studies point out that how the Wife is shown is not fixed. They suggest that what she means changes in different situations and for different readers.

2.2 Competing Interpretations: Subversion vs. Compliance

The academic argument about the Wife's character comes down to whether she goes against or supports patriarchal rules. Feminist interpretations stress her ability to cause trouble. Bornstein (1983) and Dinshaw (1989) think her bold way of speaking, being open about sex, and not accepting church authority are challenges to medieval gender hierarchies. Dinshaw's materialist way of looking at things focuses on how the Wife's looks, like her teeth with a gap and bright red stockings, and her marriage adventures go against the Church's idea of how women should be modest. These interpretations together show her as an early feminist. She uses language and cultural areas to claim power for herself.

But antifeminist critics doubt how effective her resistance is. Hansen (1997) says that the Wife depends on books written by men, such as the Bible and Ptolemy. This weakens her claims to be independent. Patterson (2003) shows that most of the things she quotes come from male writers. This shows that her "female experience" is made by patriarchal talk. These scholars see her giving in to Jankyn not as a story problem but as the natural result of her first agreeing with patriarchal systems.

2.3 Interdisciplinary Approaches and Methodological Innovations

Recent academic work has broadened the set of tools for analyzing the Wife. It does this through methods that combine different fields. Baker (2010) uses sociological performativity theory. She argues that the Wife's marriage talks involve her controlling language, sex, and material things. These actions are a type of resistance against patriarchal structures. Ormrod's (2015) digital humanities project follows changes in manuscripts. It shows how scribes changed her speech and actions. They did this to stress different parts of her character. For example, they

changed her from being boldly sexual to being submissively religious. These studies point out that the Wife is not a fixed text figure. She is shaped by both what the author wanted and how readers understand her.

2.4 Persistent Debates and Unresolved Tensions

Even with all this in - depth criticism, important debates still go on:

Subversion vs. Compliance: Is it possible to make the Wife's resistance match up with her final act of giving in? Or does her journey show the boundaries of what medieval women could do?

Authorial Intent: When Chaucer created the Wife, was he showing understanding for the difficulties women faced? Or was he using her as a warning story to show the mistakes of feminism?

Reception History: How did medieval readers see the Wife when compared to modern feminist interpretations? The fact that her character is shown differently in various manuscripts indicates that her reception history is more intricate than people used to think.

The history of how critics have viewed the Wife of Bath shows that she is still one of Chaucer's most controversial characters. Feminist interpretations praise her as a voice that challenges the status quo, while antifeminist critiques focus on how she fits into patriarchal systems. Approaches that combine different fields of study have added more to this debate. At the same time, they also bring to light ongoing conflicts about her ability to act independently, what the author meant, and how she has been received over time. Future research should place importance on analyzing changes over time, studying manuscripts, and using intersectional frameworks. These steps will help us better understand the Wife as a complex character with a specific place in history.

3. Feminist Perspective on the Wife of Bath

3.1 Analysis of the Wife of Bath from a Feminist Perspective

Contemporary feminist scholarship frequently positions the Wife of Bath as an exceptional female voice within medieval literary canon. Her assertive claims to marital autonomy and sexual agency directly confront the institutionalized patriarchy of 14th-century England. By demanding control over her marital choices and openly discussing female desire, she disrupts the Church-sanctioned ideals of wifely submission and sexual repression..[8] This interpretation is primarily based on the following three core characteristics:

3.1.1 Authorizing Marital Experience and Contesting Female Discursive Power

The Wife of Bath's prologue opens with a radical redefinition of epistemological authority: she positions her personal marital experiences as valid counter-narratives to scriptural teachings and scholastic discourses. Her famous declaration:

*"Experience, though noon auctoritee,
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me"* (lines 1-2)

constitutes a direct challenge to the male-dominated knowledge systems of her era.s. She declares:

*"To speak of the woe that is in marriage,
For who so will, example take from me,
Of married life, I think that I may guess."* (lines 1-3)

This emphasis on personal experience is seen as a feminist resistance against the male monopoly on knowledge. Furthermore, through her five marriages, she constructs a female-centered philosophy of marriage that contradicts male narratives, even openly questioning the dogma that "a woman should marry only once" (p. 401), thereby subverting traditional Christian expectations of female chastity. The Wife of Bath's discursive strategy exemplifies what feminist theorists call "oppositional reading"—a strategy where marginalized groups resist dominant ideologies by finding gaps in hegemonic texts. Her five marriages serve not only as a challenge to male authority but also as a "*counter-narrative*"—a narrative that disrupts and rewrites the male-dominated history of marriage.

3.1.2 Public Defiance of Patriarchal Marital Norms

Beyond critiquing marital institutions, the Wife of Bath engages in tangible acts of resistance against male hegemony within marriage. Her destruction of Jankyn's antifeminist book (lines 785-796) exemplifies this defiance, as does her linguistic subversion of clerical discourse through vulgar humor and bawdy wordplay. For instance, in her conflict with her fifth husband, Jankyn, she tears three pages from a book that slandered women (lines 785-796), an act interpreted as a material attack on patriarchal ideology. She declares:

"I'll have my vengeance on this cursed book,

For I'll not let it go unchallenged." (line 692)

She uses verbal violence to retaliate against male discursive hegemony, attempting to claim equal conversational rights in marriage. Additionally, her frank expressions of sexuality (e.g., "the purpose for which we are made") and her rejection of chastity ("though some prefer chastity, I do not envy them") further challenge the medieval moral framework that confined female bodies to passivity and silence. Her candor is seen as a feminist struggle for bodily autonomy, dismantling the religious and literary stigmatization of female desire.

3.1.3 Reconstructing Female Subjectivity through Classical Texts

Although the Wife of Bath frequently cites the Bible and classical authorities (e.g., Solomon, Abraham), her use of these texts is not passive acceptance but selective reinterpretation to legitimize female agency. For example, she cites Genesis ("*For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife*") (p. 402) to argue for marital equality, and references Solomon's polygamy (lines 35-45) to justify women's right to remarry. This appropriation of classical texts reflects what feminist literary criticism terms "*appropriative resistance*"—a strategy where women writers reclaim and reinterpret male-authored texts to assert female subjectivity. Her citations are not blind adherence to authority but attempts to find support for female rights within patriarchal discourse, thereby constructing a "*counter-authority*."

However, this feminist interpretation faces significant criticism. Post-feminist scholars like Elaine Tuttle Hansen argue that the Wife of Bath's resistance is ultimately co-opted by patriarchal discourse: her attacks on men still rely on male-defined linguistic rules, and her eventual silencing (losing her hearing and submitting to Jankyn) exposes the patriarchal suppression of female subjectivity. This tension will be further explored in the next section.

4. Revealing Contradictions and Dependence on Male Power

Despite her subversive potential, the Wife of Bath's narrative is riddled with contradictions that ultimately undermine her feminist aspirations, revealing her deep entanglement within patriarchal structures. While she appears to challenge male authority, her discourse and actions remain fundamentally dependent on male-defined frameworks, exposing the limitations of her resistance.

4.1 Performative Resistance and the Illusion of Autonomy

A closer examination reveals that the Wife's resistance frequently operates through performative excess rather than material change. Her hyperbolic enumeration of spouses - "five husbands... and would to God it were not six" (line 402) - functions as a theatrical display calculated to provoke moral outrage while masking her complicity with patriarchal structures. This aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, wherein identity is constituted through repetitive acts rather than innate essence. This performative resistance aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, wherein identity is constructed through repeated acts rather than inherent traits. The Wife of Bath's exaggerated femininity (her gaudy clothing, assertive speech, and sexual bravado) is not a rejection of patriarchy but a hyperbolic enactment of it, reinforcing the very stereotypes she seemingly opposes.

Moreover, her reliance on biblical and classical authorities to justify her behavior (e.g., citing Solomon's polygamy or Paul's epistles) demonstrates that even her "*rebellious*" discourse is mediated through male-authored texts[10]. As Hansen notes, her reinterpretations are often misreadings or selective quotations, revealing her inability to fully escape patriarchal discourse (Hansen, 1997, p. 28)[2]. Her claim to "experience" as authoritative is itself a male-sanctioned form of validation, as medieval epistemology privileged experiential knowledge only when it aligned with ecclesiastical or scholastic norms.

4.2 The Failure of Subversion: Submission to Jankyn

The climactic moment of the Wife's tale arrives when Jankyn's physical violence - striking her on the head "so that she fell down in a swoon" (line 796) and permanently deafening her - symbolically enacts the silencing of female voices. This brutal suppression follows her intellectual defiance, suggesting that even radical speech cannot escape the material consequences of patriarchal power. This moment exposes the hollowness of her resistance: despite her verbal dominance, she remains physically and ideologically powerless against male coercion. Her eventual submission—"And so I was cured, and became his wife, obedient and meek" (p. 429)—illustrates the inevitability of her return to patriarchal norms.

This dynamic reflects what Foucault terms "docile bodies"—individuals disciplined through physical and psychological coercion to conform to power structures. The Wife of Bath's transformation from a "*shrew*" to a "*model wife*" mirrors the medieval marital ideal of quid pro quo: her temporary rebellion is punished, and her compliance is rewarded with social and domestic stability.

4.3 The Male Gaze and the Construction of the "Fictional" Woman

A critical post-feminist reading, as advanced by Hansen (1997), argues that the Wife of Bath is not a liberated woman but a male-authored construct designed to satirize female assertiveness. Her exaggerated traits—her greed, promiscuity, and loquacity—are drawn from medieval antifeminist tropes (e.g., the "*loathly lady*" or "*termagant wife*"), suggesting that Chaucer uses her to reinforce, rather than dismantle, patriarchal anxieties about women's power.

This interpretation aligns with the concept of "*narrative transvestism*" (Kahn, 1991), wherein male authors adopt female voices not to empower women but to explore male desires and fears under the guise of female subjectivity[2][3]. The Wife of Bath's voice, then, is not her own but a male fantasy of female rebellion—a safe space where male authors can indulge in and ultimately neutralize female transgression.

4.4 Synthesis: The Wife of Bath as a Patriarchal Paradox

The Wife of Bath embodies a paradox: she is both a product of patriarchal oppression and a (however flawed) agent of resistance. Her narrative reveals the impossibility of complete female liberation within a male-dominated discourse, as her attempts to subvert gender norms are inevitably co-opted or punished. This tension reflects the broader medieval struggle for female agency, where women's voices were either silenced or permitted only within strictly circumscribed limits.

Ultimately, the Wife of Bath's story serves as a cautionary tale: even the most seemingly empowered female characters in medieval literature remain tethered to patriarchal structures, their "*rebellion*" serving to reinforce, rather than challenge, the status quo. This reading complicates the feminist celebration of the Wife of Bath, exposing her as both a subversive figure and a victim of the very system she resists.

5. Chaucer's Antifeminist Tendencies

Having analyzed the Wife of Bath's character from a feminist perspective and revealed the contradictions that ultimately undermine her subversive potential, we now turn to examine Geoffrey Chaucer's authorial intent and the broader antifeminist tendencies evident in his portrayal of this character. While the Wife of Bath's narrative appears to challenge patriarchal norms on the surface, a closer reading reveals that Chaucer's construction of her character serves to reinforce, rather than dismantle, the very misogynistic ideologies he seemingly critiques. This section will demonstrate how Chaucer employs the Wife of Bath as a literary device to perpetuate antifeminist discourse, exposing the limitations of her resistance within the patriarchal framework of medieval society.

5.1 The Wife of Bath as a Satirical Construct

To fully grasp Chaucer's depiction of the Wife, we must situate her within the binary framework of medieval literary femininity, where women were invariably polarized into either sanctified paragons (like the Virgin Mary) or demonic temptresses (akin to Eve). The Wife's exaggerated carnality - her "gap-toothed" grin (line 152), "loud, brazen" voice (line 458), and ostentatious attire - deliberately aligns her with the latter category. This characterization serves a dual purpose: while seemingly celebrating female agency, it simultaneously reinforces the medieval anxiety that women's unchecked sexuality threatens social order. The Wife of Bath, with her exaggerated sexuality, assertiveness, and defiance of marital norms, fits squarely into the latter category—a deliberate exaggeration of feminine "*excess*" that serves to justify male dominance. Her character is not a celebration of female agency but a satirical indictment of women who overstep their prescribed roles, reinforcing the idea that female autonomy is inherently threatening to social order.

This satirical intent is evident in the Wife of Bath's physical description, which emphasizes her grotesque and hypersexualized features:

*"She was gap-toothed, her eyes were bold,
Her hat was like a buckler broad,
Her stockings were of scarlet red,
And gartered tight beneath her knee."* (lines 457-460)

Such imagery aligns with medieval antifeminist tropes that associate female sexuality with moral corruption and social disorder. Chaucer's emphasis on her physicality and ostentatious behavior serves to caricature her as a figure of ridicule, undermining any potential feminist reading of her character.

5.2 The Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms

Despite the Wife of Bath's claims to marital autonomy and her critiques of male-dominated institutions, Chaucer's narrative ultimately reinforces the patriarchal structures she appears to resist. The narrative arc from the Wife's

defiant prologue to her abject submission in the tale's denouement (lines 796-800) exposes the structural futility of female resistance within patriarchal systems. The text states:

*"And then he struck me on the head,
And knocked me senseless to the ground,
And ever since I have been deaf in one ear.
But he made me his wife, and I became
Obedient and meek, as a wife should be."* (lines 796-800, p. 429)

When Jankyn delivers his brutal assault "*struck me on the head so that I fell down in a swoon*" followed by enforced silence ("*I was cured... and became obedient*"), the text stages a brutal pedagogy: female autonomy, once asserted, must be violently re-contained. This echoes Foucault's concept of "*docile bodies*," wherein resistance is not annihilated but reconfigured into compliant subjectivity. Her brief period of defiance is punished, and her eventual compliance is framed as the natural and desirable outcome of marital harmony. Chaucer's narrative thus reinforces the medieval ideal of wifely submission, using the Wife of Bath's story as a cautionary tale about the dangers of female rebellion.

5.3 The Male Gaze and the Construction of Female Otherness

The Wife's characterization operates as a case study in medieval male spectatorship. Her "*bold eyes*" (line 458) and "*loose, lascivious*" gaze (implied in line 153) transform her into an object of both fascination and revulsion for the male pilgrims. This visual economy finds its counterpart in the manuscript illuminations where she is consistently depicted with grotesquely exaggerated features - a visual corollary to the textual "*othering*" process. By positioning her as the locus of male desire and anxiety, Chaucer reproduces the same patriarchal logic he ostensibly critiques. In this view, women are seen as objects. They're defined by what men want and what men are scared of. The Wife of Bath isn't built as a complete, real - life person. Instead, she's a mirror of men's worries about women's sexuality and power. Her over - the - top qualities, like being greedy, having many sexual partners, and talking too much, come from medieval antifeminist writings. Books such as Roman de la Rose and Theophrastus's Golden Book of Marriage paint women as being dishonest and good at tricking others by nature.

Making the Wife of Bath into the "Other" helps strengthen patriarchal rules. It does this by setting her up as the opposite of the perfect, obedient woman. Her behavior that goes against the rules isn't praised. It's shown as a warning about what could happen if women try to be independent. Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath to voice both feminist and antifeminist ideas. This ends up limiting her ability to cause trouble. It makes sure her story supports the way things are, not challenges it.

In the end, although the Wife of Bath's story seems to go against patriarchal rules on the surface, a careful look shows that Chaucer's way of showing her actually supports the misogynistic ideas he seems to be criticizing. By using satirical exaggeration, backing up patriarchal norms, and creating the idea of women as "the other," Chaucer makes sure the Wife of Bath's ability to cause change is kept in check. Her story is like a warning about the risks of women rebelling. It supports the medieval idea of a wife being submissive and the male - controlled social system.

This analysis highlights how complex Chaucer's work is. It both reflects and criticizes the gender rules of his time. Even though the Wife of Bath is an interesting and complex character, her story mainly points out the limits of women's power in a patriarchal system. It doesn't celebrate or push for feminist ideas.

6. The Social and Cultural Roots of Chaucer's Antifeminism

6.1 Medieval Marriage and the Church's Influence

To get a full grasp of Chaucer's take on the Wife of Bath and his hidden antifeminist leanings, we have to look at the socio - religious setup that ruled marriage and gender relations in 14th - century England. Back then, Late medieval marriage functioned as a nexus of ecclesiastical control and feudal economics. The Church's tripartite doctrine - procreation, fidelity, and indissolubility - was not merely theological but legally enforceable through canon law. For widows like the Wife, this created a paradox: while they gained property rights denied to other women, they remained subject to the "*marital debt*" doctrine (requiring reciprocal sexual obligations). The Wife's insistence on "*maistrie*" (line 157) thus represents not proto-feminist rebellion but a canny negotiation within these constrained parameters. The Church's ideas about marriage put women in a contradictory spot. On one hand, they were vital for having children. On the other hand, their sexuality was seen as sinful. This conflict shows up clearly in the Wife of Bath's character and her battles within marriage.

The Church thought of marriage as a holy agreement with three main aims: having kids, being faithful, and the marriage being unbreakable. Canon law set these rules, and they had a big impact on what medieval society expected from married life. Women were supposed to have children and be loyal to their husbands, while husbands had the final say in the marriage [7]. This unequal structure is obvious in the Wife of Bath's repeated claims to be in control of her husbands. But these attempts fail because her fifth husband, Jankyn, beats her and makes her obey.

The Church's ways of controlling things didn't stop at marriage. They reached into every part of female sexuality. Women's bodies were considered naturally full of lust, so the Church kept a close eye on them through things like priests not getting married, keeping women locked up, and making them confess their sins[8]. The Wife of Bath talks openly about her sexual experiences. She brags about her "gap - toothed" charm and how she uses sex to control her husbands. This both goes against and supports the Church's rules. Even though she says she has control over her own sex life, her punishment in the end shows that the Church still had the power to label female desire as a problem[9].

Chaucer's education and place in society meant he was involved in academic arguments about marriage and sexuality. The idea of the "marital debt", which said that both partners in a marriage had to satisfy each other sexually, made the Wife's situation even more complicated. She uses this idea to back up her demands, but the Church thinks her view is too extreme. Chaucer uses her character to look at these tensions. In the end, he shows that even when women try to be in control of their own sexuality, they're held back by the male - dominated religious system.

The Wife of Bath's story shows how medieval women dealt with these opposing expectations. She got married multiple times and acted boldly, which challenged traditional gender roles. But in the end, she's silenced and made to be submissive. This mirrors the general truth of medieval women's lives. They could try to push the limits, but they could never completely escape the restrictions of a society ruled by men. Chaucer's portrayal of her, even though it might seem kind at times, actually strengthens these limits. He does this by having her physically punished and ideologically silenced.

The Wife of Bath's difficulties show the impossible situation women were in. They were expected to be obedient wives and have lots of children, but they were always watched and judged because of their sexuality. Her story both criticizes and supports these male - dominated norms. It shows how much Church teachings influenced medieval gender relations.

6.2 The "Loathly Lady" Trope and Antifeminist Literature

Building on the church-based foundations of medieval marriage, we now look at the literary traditions that shaped Chaucer's portrayal of female characters. Specifically, we'll focus on the "loathly lady" trope and what it meant for gender power dynamics. This literary motif showed a grotesque or domineering woman turning into a beautiful, submissive wife. It was a powerful cultural way to reinforce patriarchal fears about female autonomy.

The "loathly lady" motif constitutes a discursive strategy for neutralizing female assertiveness. From the *Roman de la Rose's* *Fals-Semblant* to the *Book of the City of Ladies'* transgressive women, this trope invariably frames female power as either monstrous (requiring taming) or illusory (requiring male validation). Chaucer's adaptation in the Wife's Tale follows this pattern: the Loathly Lady's demand for "sovereignty" (line 1038) is gratified only when she metamorphoses into the idealized silent woman, her speech reduced to the single word "kiss." This narrative resolution underscores marriage as the only permissible arena for female agency - and even then, only when silenced. These stories follow a pattern: a knight must marry an unattractive, often domineering woman. She then magically becomes a beautiful, obedient spouse after he accepts her terms. This transformation is both a literal and metaphorical "*taming*" of female power. It reassures audiences that even the most assertive women can be domesticated by male authority.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale directly uses this tradition. The old hag who makes the knight answer "what women most desire" has many traits of the loathly lady. She is physically unattractive, loudly asserts her rights, and first seems like a figure to mock. When the knight gives her "sovereignty," she turns into a beautiful, submissive wife. This mirrors tropes from earlier literature. The story's ending reinforces the idea that female authority is unwanted and must be given up for marital harmony.

The Wife of Bath herself, though more complex than earlier characters, still fits this framework. Her physical description—gap-toothed, bold-eyed, and gaudily dressed—matches medieval depictions of the loathly lady. Also, her story ends with her submitting to Jankyn's authority after he assaults her. This echoes the punitive endings common in these tales. Even her assertive speech, which seems subversive at first, actually reinforces patriarchal norms by showing the dangers of female disobedience.

This literary tradition reflects and strengthens wider cultural fears about female sexuality and power. The loathly lady's transformation is a fantasy of male control. It tells audiences that women's rebellious tendencies can be controlled through marriage and submission. Chaucer's use of this trope shows his mixed feelings about female agency. While he gives the Wife a voice for her desires, he still puts her through the same punitive narrative arc as loathly lady stories.

The "loathly lady" motif's persistence in medieval literature shows how deep the fear of female autonomy was in patriarchal societies. By repeating stories where assertive women are "tamed" in marriage, medieval writers pushed the idea that female power was unnatural and dangerous. Chaucer's work, though more nuanced than many others, still takes part in this. It punishes the Wife of Bath for her transgressive behavior.

This shows how literary traditions acted as ideological tools, shaping and reflecting society's views on gender. The "loathly lady" trope gave audiences a comforting narrative during anxieties about female empowerment. Works like *The Wife of Bath's Tale* used this framework to both critique and reinforce patriarchal norms. Chaucer's engagement with these traditions reveals how individual creativity and cultural constraints interact in portraying women.

6.3 The Economic and Class Dimensions of Gender Relations

While much scholarship has focused on the religious and literary influences shaping Chaucer's portrayal of women, we must also consider the economic and class-based factors that fundamentally structured gender relations in 14th-century England. As a prosperous widow controlling multiple estates, the Wife occupies an ambiguous class position that both enables and constrains her resistance. Her wealth grants temporary leverage over husbands (notably in negotiating marital terms), yet her final submission to Jankyn reveals capitalism's gendered limits: economic power cannot fully insulate women from patriarchal violence. This dynamic anticipates later feminist critiques of bourgeois feminism's class blindspots, wherein liberation is often contingent upon elite status. This perspective shifts our analysis from purely ideological critiques to consider how material conditions shaped both women's opportunities and the cultural anxieties they provoked.

Medieval English society maintained strict correlations between wealth, marital status, and gender roles. Widows occupied a unique position in this system, possessing legal rights to their late husbands' property that unmarried women and wives lacked. The Wife of Bath's five marriages and subsequent prosperity place her squarely within this privileged category, making her both an exception to and a product of medieval gender norms. Her assertion of "maistrie" (sovereignty) in marriage can thus be read not just as personal ambition, but as an expression of class privilege - a wealthy woman leveraging her economic independence to negotiate more favorable marital terms.

The tension between the Wife's economic agency and her ultimate subjugation reveals the limits of class-based power for medieval women. While her wealth grants her certain freedoms - including the ability to choose husbands and speak openly about sexuality - these advantages remain circumscribed by patriarchal structures. Jankyn's physical violence and the forced reading of the antifeminist treatise demonstrate that even wealthy women could not escape male dominance in intimate relationships. This dynamic reflects broader medieval anxieties about female economic autonomy, which threatened to disrupt the gendered economic order where men controlled production and women managed consumption.

Chaucer's portrayal thus reflects contemporary concerns about the growing visibility of economically independent women in urban centers like London. The Wife's character embodies both the possibilities and dangers of female economic agency in a rapidly changing economy. Her story serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of pushing too far beyond prescribed gender roles, even for those with class privileges.

The Wife of Bath's story becomes not just a debate about marriage or sexuality, but a window into the complex interplay between gender, class, and economic power in 14th-century England. In our final section, we will synthesize these findings to propose a more nuanced understanding of Chaucer's antifeminist tendencies as products of his specific historical moment.

7. Conclusion

The Wife of Bath emerges as a literary site where competing ideologies of gender, class, and religion collide. Far from being a straightforward feminist or antifeminist figure, she embodies the contradictions of her historical moment: a woman who weaponizes patriarchal discourse even as she exposes its violence. Her narrative arc - from assertive defiance to violent subjugation - does not merely reflect individual psychology, but stages the systemic erasure of female agency within medieval institutions.

This interpretation challenges binary readings that label the Wife either as a proto-feminist hero or a misogynistic caricature. Instead, it positions her as a dialectical figure: her resistance is both real and limited, her voice both

empowered and co-opted. By reading her through the lenses of material feminism, queer theory, and manuscript studies, we uncover a character who disrupts modern scholarly categories as violently as she upends medieval norms. The Wife of Bath thus remains not just Chaucer's most controversial creation, but a mirror for our own struggles with gender, power, and historical interpretation.

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