

The Wife of Bath: Feminist or Antifeminist?

Zhang lu

Jilin Normal University of Engineering and Technology, Changchun Jilin 130000, China

ABSTRACT. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale makes Canterbury Tales more attractive and enchanting. Both The Prologue and The Tale concern females and their desires. This paper aims to analyze the Wife's ambivalent personalities embodied in the Prologue and the Tale. Under her striking bold feminist advocating, there hides some antifeminism tendency.*

KEYWORDS: *feminist; antifeminist*

1. Introduction

In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, the wife is a paradox character under the pen of Chaucer, who deliberately depicts such character to demonstrate the females' pursuits and desires in family and life in the fourteenth century. H. Marshall Leicester, JR. states that the Tale "is a male poet's impersonation of a female speaker. It appears that there is some relation for Chaucer between taking a position on women – about who they are, what they want, and how they should proceed – and taking a woman's position" (158). Some critics assert that the Wife of Bath is the reprehensive of a typical feminist, whereas, other critics argue that the Wife is self-doubtful and she is an antifeminist under the pen of the male author Chaucer actually. From the text, it can be found that the character of the Wife is paradoxical and controversial. Her interpretation of the Bible, personal experience and her tale unveil both her feminism and antifeminism standpoints simultaneously. Chaucer sophisticatedly uses the Wife's Prologue and Tale to expose the double sword of the Wife's eloquent speeches and leave the readers great space to debate and ponder on his masterpiece.

2. Analyzing about feminist and antifeminist

2.1 *The Wife of Bath's Feminist Claim*

According to the Farther of the Church, one should value first celibacy, then widowhood, marriage third, and successive marriage is the "least perfect choice". However, the Wife gives an opposite preacher in the prologue. She argues "God has plainly Bidden us to increase and multiply" (219) in order to prove the validity of

marriage. As for successive marriage, she expresses, “Here’s to the sixth, whenever he turns up. I won’t stay chaste for ever, that’s a fact” (220). Although in the fourteenth century, the Church Father advocates celibacy, the Wife uses her own experience to challenge the authority. She not only marries a man but also has married many times, even is prepared for the following one. Above all, she reinterprets the Bible on the topic of marriage, convincing the audience with her doctrine, that is “to be married is no sin, better it is to marry than to burn” (220).

It is taken to be granted that chastity is the virtue of females in the Wife’s living times. But she refutes that “if no seed were ever sown, from what, then, could virginity be grown” (220-221)? Later, she gives an example.

*For as you know, no master of a household
Has all of his utensils made of gold;
Some are of wood, and yet they are of use.
The Lord calls folk to Him in many ways,
And each has his peculiar gift from God,
Some this, some that, even as He thinks good.* (221)

From the words above, the Wife highlights both the individuality and equality of two sexes. In her opinion, a husband shall be “both [her] debtor and [her] slave” (223). In the opinion of the public in the fourteenth century, a wife is the property of a husband. Yet the Wife of Bath subversively takes her husband as her debtor and slave, which is obviously a feminism discourse. She proposes the individuality, equality of women by exerting her eloquent preacher and exemplifying her own marriage experience.

In the second part of the Prologue, the Wife tells about her five husbands and further illustrates her views on men and women’s relationship in a family. According to the Wife, the first three husband are rich and old, but they are good as they give her all their land and property. The Wife has clear understanding of what makes women attractive to man.

*“You say that some folk want us for our riches,
Some for our looks, and others for our figures,
Or for our sex appeal, or our good breeding;
Some want a girl who dances, or can sing,
Else it’s our slender hands and arms they want.”* (225)

Therefore, wealth, beauty, breeding, entertainment and female body are what men desire in the Wife’s mind. Besides that, she also acknowledges what they dislike. That is “[a] leaking roof, and smoke, and nagging wives”. It is obvious that the previous two are objective phenomena, while the third thing is men’s subjective feelings toward women. Keeping them in mind, the Wife takes advantage of her youth, vitality and wisdom to win her the upper hand in the family. She always

governs her husbands instead of being ruled. The reason why she subverts the governing roles in the family probably because she has equipped herself with the knowledge of men's preference and their hatred. Therefore, the Wife could go along with her husband well, and gradually reach the position of governing. The fourth husband of the Wife is a libertine who died early. Then she marries a scholar of Oxford who is only twenty years old. The Wife loves him the best, whereas he is also the worst of all. They quarrel over the bias stories about women that the husband reads every day. And in fury, the Wife tears a page out of her husband's book, which irritates the man and he hits the Wife on the ear violently, resulting in her nearly losing hearing. Even if the Wife hurts her ear, she wins the sovereign in the family after the fight. She makes her husband burn his book and gets the complete command.

In terms of the social norm, the family property, even the wife is possessed by the husband in the fourteenth century. However, the Wife of Bath radically holds the opinion that the wife is not the possession but the owner, who has the right to keep and use the money in the family as the same way as the husband. What's more, she criticizes the scolding husband can't occupy both the wife's body and master the finance in the family. The Wife admits that she takes her body as the exchange of property, because she supposes that "everything has its price; You cannot lure a hawk with empty hand". In her perspective, whatever one wants to get, she must sacrifice something for it. For her, she can meet her husband's sexual needs in order to get their property. However, she can't accept losing her body without paying back. Additionally, the Wife wants liberty too.

We love no man who watches carefully

Our coming and going; we want liberty. (227)

The evidence above clearly reveals that the Wife is a feminist, who boldly advocates that females should govern the family, property and receive individual liberty. Her viewpoints are totally diverse from those prevailing one in the hegemony society in the Middle Ages. People think women are born with "three things by nature: lies, and tears, and spinning" (229). Under the pen of males, women always betray their husband, even ruin the mankind. Whether they love their husbands or they hate them, women would bring disasters to men. There is no woman praised by the writer or authority. The Wife responds that it depends on "who drew the picture of the lion" (236)? Women's image is negative because the writer is men. If women become the writer or painter, their image would be changed definitely. In the Prologue, the Wife exposes her feminism attitude in a direct way, which matches her appearance depicted in the general prologue very well, aggressive, bold and radical.

Both the Prologue and the Tale obviously show the feminism standpoint of the Wife. Women are "not utterly marginalized and silenced, but could play a role in fourteenth-century textual communities...[They have] subversive potential, the possibility of mutuality in heterosexual relationships" (Hansen 274-275). Women not only need governing power, financial autonomy but also liberty. Meanwhile, in her story, the Wife portrays the women image of wise, energetic and tactical, which

contrasts the traditional image of the women who are innocent, obedient and subordinate. The Wife's words spread her feminism attitude here and there.

2.2 The Wife of the Bath's Antifeminism Tendency

Some critics comments that the Wife is actually an antifeminist. Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out the character of Wife of Bath "emphasizes its powerlessness, self-destructiveness, and silencing" (400). She is "a dramatic and important instance of woman's silence and suppression in history and in language" (400) Her frequent quotation from the Bible and other patriarchy stories, the transformation from an old ugly woman to a young beauty and other details expose the Wife's antifeminism nature.

Although the Wife always has her different interpretation of the Bible, she always depends on it to illustrate her argument. Admittedly, she states, "As long as they live God has granted women three things by nature: lies, and tears, and spinning" (229). The deceptive nature of women helps the Wife wins upper hand in the family, which in the essence is the destruction of the positive female image. Furthermore, in the Tale, when the knight is searching for what the most desirable thing women want, he finds answers from different women. Some prefer wealth, some like honour, some love fine clothes. And there are many other answers, like happiness, the pleasures of the bed, compliment and cosset, freedom, being thought dependable and discreet. From those women replies, it can be seen that vanity, women innate quality closely relates to greedy, dishonest. Those descriptions are another evidence of the Wife's antifeminism attitude.

The old lady finally becomes beautiful and young as well as loyal to her husband. She promises her husband "you can deal just as you like with me" (250), which means she gives up the governing position in the family and willingly becomes subordinates to her husband. Therefore, it can be concluded that the inner heart of the Wife has the inclination of antifeminism. She can't get rid of the social standards and norm totally, instead, the Wife sometimes unconsciously betrays her feminism appearance.

3. Conclusion

It's hard to decide whether the Wife of Bath is a feminist or an antifeminist but safe to conclude she is the integrated and complex one. Chaucer applies his tactful arrangement to depict the controversial character who is both wild, bold, aggressive, dominated and catering and subordinated, through which, Chaucer may reveal the women desire of governing and liberty, the difficulties of getting rid of the boundary of patriarchal ideology, and the ambivalence in human beings as well.

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