**Character of the Wife of Bath**

In Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, Chaucer opens with a description of twenty-nine people who are going on a pilgrimage. Each person has a distinct personality that we can recognize from the way people behave today. He purposely makes the Wife of Bath stand out more compared to the other characters. In the General Prologue, the Wife of Bath is intentionally described in an explicit way to provoke a shocking response. Her clothes, physical features and other references to her past are purposely discussed by Chaucer causing the reader to wonder how well she fits the rules imposed by Christian authorities regarding womanly behavior. Women were categorized as saints or sinners by their actions according to Christian tradition. The Wife of Bath is a headstrong bold woman of her time. She shows off her Sunday clothes with evident pride, wearing ten pounds of cloths, woven by herself. Her clothing symbolizes to the reader that she is not timid or shy and also shows off her expertise as a weaver.

Chaucer’s description of the wife of Bath’s facial and bodily features is sexually suggestive. In the General Prologue Chaucer’s description involves her physical appearance describing her clothes, legs, feet, hips, and most importantly her gap-tooth, which during that time symbolized sensuality and lust. He discusses how she is a talented weaver and devoted Christian who goes on pilgrimages often. This may suggest that she is a religious woman. But later on it is seen that her reason to go on these pilgrimages is not religion. She feels that every place should be seen and this has nothing to do with religion. She is a very self-confident woman who thinks highly of herself and her skills as cloth maker. She is more interested in love than anything that has to do with homemaking. Chaucer also emphasizes that she had ‘Housbondes at chirche-dore I have hadde fyve’, which means that she has been married five times. She is described as knowing all the remedies of love, since she is so experienced with men. One other important feature in the portrayal of the wife is that she is deaf in one ear.

In both the Prologue and the Tale, the Wife of Bath discusses marriage, virginity, and most importantly the question of sovereignty. In the Tale, she is suggesting control that women should have. She is a strong-willed and dominant woman who herself gets what she wants when she wants it. She cannot accept defeat no matter what the cost is. She thinks that this is the way things should be and men should obey her. She displays a very sick and power thirsty attitude when she says: ‘In wifhood wol I use myn instrument as freely as my makere hath it sent. If I be dangerous, God yive me sorwe: myn housbonder shall it han both eve and morwe whan that him list come forth and pay his dette. A housbonde wol I have, I wol nat lette, which shall be bother my detour and mt thral, and have his tribulacion withal upon his flesh whil that I am his wif’. She boldly says that she wants to use her ‘instrument’ or body as a weapon and that she owns her husband, who owes her. Since she is his wife she feels he should bow to her. She also discusses how she had control over her husbands saying ‘I governed hem so wel after my lawe’. She is a woman always in thirst of attention, not only sexually, but as a person as well. It upsets her when her fifth husband, a clerk, is more interested in books than he was in her.

Being a capitalist clothier she uses her own body as a commodity in demand so that when she denies it she can extort whatever ransom she likes from her husband. She is well aware of her sexuality as a commodity and marriage itself as a bargain. However, the need of physical reciprocation leaves her miserable and vulnerable to the young clerk Jankyn whom she marries out of love. It is disturbing to see Dame Alison losing ground to the same misogynist scriptures she fought against. She is overcome by her new husband’s physical strength. She shapes her character out of the same anti-feminist texts which slender her and resorts to emotional extortion by pretending to be dead. It is only when Jankyn promises her all his lands that she resumes her sovereignty.

The Wife of Bath’s life can be seen as an apologia defining her own internal space against the inextricable, unbending social order. She accepts the truth of her animalistic existence sidestepping the age old assumption of men’s supremacy backed by sardonic verses. She is not a woman who cares about changing the world for the benefit of other women who are subordinate to men. She is not a feminist fighting for the rights of all women. She is not fighting for liberation of women. She is using sex to manipulate men just as men do to women because she openly is saying that she will give herself to the man. Thus her whole character focuses on her craving for sex and her urge to give men pleasure through sex. She is a selfish, power-hungry, and immoral woman.

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