Wife Of Bath: Prologue And Tale Analysis

Context:

Spending the last decade writing The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer claimed in The General Prologue that he would write approximately one hundred and twenty stories, four for each pilgrim to tell on their journey to and from Canterbury. However, Chaucer only managed to write twenty-two and had started two more, poking fun at a variety of professions. The comedy element categorises the genre of The Canterbury Tales as estate satire. Some characters have their own individual prologues one being The Wife of Bath Prologue and Tale. Travelling alongside the Wife on the pilgrimage are people from all three classes; nobility (knights, squires, yeoman), clergy (nun, monk, friars) and peasantry (cook, miller, student), all characters who Chaucer openly mock, writing unconvincing prologues and tales. Yet the Wife is “Chaucer’s most convincing portrait of actual female experience” (Hansen 1992:100) due to the length of her prologue, the tone and language used and the detail in which her personality and lifestyle is described.

Tone, Meter:

Written in iambic pentameter with rhyming couplets, the prologue and the tale mimics the style of spoken word. However, Chaucer often made the subject of the sentence come after the verb, making it difficult to read, the reasoning for this was to keep the couplets rhyming. Employing an enthusiastic tone, the Wife revels in her youth and sexual exploits she and others partake in, this tone is also adopted when the Wife is recalling her wedding nights. The use of an enthusiastic tone for something scandalous can be seen as empowering to women and an important poem in the querelle des femmes debate which includes the language used to describe domesticated lifestyle “breed of pured whete-seed/ and lat us wives hote barely breed” (149-150) The prologue can be seen as asserting female authority since women in this period were the ones responsible for running a household, not marrying five times, soon to be six. The Wife also speaks in a fighting tone, by repeating “thou seist” shows that she is “fighting against the power of male voices” (Hansen 1992:31) and shows her determination to be in power. In her tale, the wife adopts a straight forward tone in which she states the actions that the knight has done and only breaks her fiction when speaking of the knight’s audacity of sighing when being told his quest.

Feminism:

The querelle des femmes debate is a literary debate about the nature and status of women which began around the late fifteenth century, early sixteenth and continued beyond the Renaissance era. Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath falls in this debate as Alisoun (the Wife) can exercise power over her husbands whether it be sexual power or manipulation “I bar him on hand he hadde enchaunted me/ (My dame taught me that subtiltee)” (581-582) Having learnt from a young age of twelve, the prologue tells the tale of “her skills in the arts of marriage having been perfected on the five husbands” (Rigby 1996:127) When speaking about Jankyn, husband number five, Alisoun speaks about abuse she has endured yet this is overthrown as

she manipulates him into obeying her and burns his book of wicked wives. This book is another method in which Alisoun shows her power, the book that Jankyn reads is an anti-feminist novel as it portrays women as evil and like the title states; wicked. The book “focuses on the misogynists’ stereotype of women as aggressive and incapable of reasoning. The Wife’s physical reaction [the beating] to the anti-feminist book exemplifies precisely the faults anti-feminists claimed women had, yet at the same time it dramatizes women’s dilemma in such a society: masculine control of culture and of the cultural image of women leaves women no place to reply within it.” (Phillips 2000:92). Nevertheless, the Wife also asserts her power with the interlude. Although it is a male that interrupts the Wife, the female still asserts her power by not only continuing her prologue but making a snide remark about the interruption implying that the Wife will tell her tale in her own time even with the male trying to assert his dominance. The interruption is further strengthened on page 301 when the prologue ends with a male talking. One can presume that this is to reinforce male dominance as a woman has been speaking for a while. The character of the Wife is portrayed to be very vocal to her husbands “Through verbal attack, as she alleges and demonstrates, she gains and kept the upper hand in her first three marriages. She views words as strategic weapons, like sex and money, in the war between the sexes she describes her verbal tactics as repayment in kind against men” (Hansen 1992:28)

Prologue:

The Wife of Bath Prologue is predominately about sex and why the act should not be chastised. Alisoun is open about sex, line 46 states that she only marries for money and sex and proceeds to plead her debate stating “in oure owene juggement” (74) Although asserting her feminist argument, the Wife also acknowledges the role women are supposed to play in medieval times, implying that wives are more serviceable and preferred over virgins. Therefore, sex should not be frowned upon, putting forward a debate that isn’t seen as one-sided as she speaks of multiple scenarios when virgins are not favourable. By doing this she debunks the argument for misogamy and shows that “marriage was central to a woman’s social identity in a way that it was not for men, since men’s legal and property rights remained unaffected by it” (Rigby 1996:127) Speaking about her experience she misuses phrases from the Bible and St Paul to reiterate her point about marriage, sexual exploits and arguments she’s had. Although she often quoted these scriptures incorrectly, it is believed that Chaucer did this on purpose to openly mock the churchmen, such as the friar who interrupted her, as they often misused scriptures to justify their devious actions. Discussing the wealth and land she has accumulated whilst being in relationships; in lines 218-220 she claims that men have already given her everything they own due to having sex with them, even implying that due to their ages they struggled to go the distance. Using her diplomatic argument Alisoun speaks about female genitalia stating that they are used for sex and babies, just like male genitalia is not used just for urinating and establishing gender, instead they are also used to “eek for engendure” (140) Claiming that genitalia of both genders can be used to pay debts and should be used freely and anyone can have sex regardless of their looks or marital status. The Wife of Bath Prologue shows Alisoun’s female authority that she holds over men and can be seen “As a desiring subject rival who is also a woman in the context of late medieval patriarchy, Alisoun actively appropriates the tools of male privilege and uses them to her own advantage” (McTaggart 2012:47) However, the feminist interpretation of the Wife can be weakened as she combines two contradictory stereotypes and conforms to some antimarriage stereotypes.

Tale:

The tale has many similarities to The Wife of Bath Prologue whether it be the somewhat silencing of women, the surrendering of genders or the talk of sex “Like the Wife’s Prologue it is about sex and inequalities of power, but in a different mode.” (Phillips 2000:99) The genre of the tale is medieval romance, as its featured characters are a knight and hag and the protagonist embarks on a quest to find out what women most desire. Although this tale parallels with the prologue it is an entirely different speaker because it is not as lewd as the prologue. Instead it is a tale “about a fairy bride who seeks out and tests a mortal lover” (Greenblatt 2012:301) This tale, like the prologue, shows female authority as the Queen is the one that ultimately decides the Knight’s fate and the hag a disguised elf-queen, is allowed to choose if she should become beautiful and unfaithful or ugly and faithful, “the shape-shifting masquerade deploys the grotesque as well as the glamorous to exaggerate and question femininity” (Crane 1994:87). The hag is the character that shows authority as she gives the knight an ultimatum to marry her, something that he did not want to do. However, by the end, the hag is silenced “And she obeys him in everything” (1261) implying that she cannot always dominate the male as “language does not serve women well because language is, according to The Canterbury Tales, an instrument for reproducing the conventions that constrain and deny both the experience of women and the representation of that experience” (Hansen 1992:39). However, the knight in the tale is portrayed as a rapist “ By verray force he rafte hir maidenhead” (894) displaying a misandrist nature towards men, as there isn’t any male in charge and the only males mentioned were the knight and friar, who were conveyed as predators and could cause fear: “The Wife of Bath’s Tale presents rape as an ungentil act of oppression by a powerful male” (Phillips 2000:145)

Overall both the prologue and tale support the querelle des femmes debate as they both show women in a positive and domineering light, yet both stories can also be contradictory and anti-feminist due to the silencing of females and payment for sex. Chaucer “place[s] gender in the social hierarchy” (Crane 1994:131) and is evident in both prologue and tale that he places the Wife on a pedestal by allowing her the longest story, yet destroys this by allowing men to interrupt and mock her. The same can apply to the tale as the hag chooses her appearance for the knight but still conforms to his wants by making herself beautiful. Therefore, it is unsure if Chaucer can be called a proto-feminist, although there is evidence that The Wife of Bath Prologue and Tale convey feminist notions.