**GEOFFREY CHAUCER’S WIFE OF BATH: A PROTO-FEMINIST PORTRAIT OF THE MEDIEVAL WOMAN?**

1. **Introduction**

Literary scholars are frequently interested in showing how a work written in older times continues to dialogue with today’s readers. In this sense, Geoffrey Chaucer’s tale “The Wife of Bath”, from “The Canterbury Tales”, has been investigated under the light of contemporary feminist issues. Critics are divided in different points of view which disagree about Chaucer’s approach on the role of women both in medieval times and in the medieval fictional narrative.

Some authors assert that Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, can be seen as an early feminist character (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984; Straus, 1988). They point out that she is confident and speaks out against the patriarchal discourse of the time in a way that was unusual in medieval literature. In this sense, Chaucer used this character to voice an opposition against misogyny (Smith, 2014; Straus, 1988). Through his “Wife of Bath”, Chaucer also questioned the clerical teachings: Alisoun is openly honest with her controversial beliefs about the role of the woman in marriage, about virginity and the pleasure in sex, and about the use of sex to obtain what she wants (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984; Smith, 2014). Additionally, the Wife of Bath also uses the English language in a liberal way which does not correspond to the social conventions of the time, and expresses her non-conformity to the medieval female stereotype (Straus, 1988).

On the other hand, there are scholars who argue that the Wife of Bath is a character who embodies too many negative female characteristics to be considered a feminist model, such as stupidity, arrogance, manipulation, deceitfulness and lewdness, and that the character only reinforces that prejudice about medieval women (Crane, 1987; Hansen, 1988). According to these authors, what Alisoun does is not empowering or revolutionary, in a strictly feminist way; on the contrary, she uses the male authoritative discourse to back up her distorted view of the world and to obtain personal benefits. Those researchers also maintain that, in order to be truly considered a woman ahead of her time, Chaucer's character would have had to prove herself independent of a man and free from the patriarchal system (Crane, 1987).

Therefore, a question is raised: Is Alisoun a typically submissive woman of the medieval narratives or does she stand out as a personification of resistance against misogyny? This paper will present a description of two different perspectives on the Wife of Bath, Chaucer’s controversial character, according to her potential for personify a proto-feminist character in medieval times. [[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **The controversial Wife of Bath**

The Wife’s narrative is divided in two parts, the Prologue and the Tale. In the Prologue, the themes of marriage and religion are addressed. In order to discuss marriage and power in the relationship, Alisoun tells the history of her tactics for gaining power and financial independence in her five marriages. With the first three husbands, she was very pragmatic about the relationships and used her body to control them and to achieve financial gain. During her fourth marriage, to a young and lusty husband, Alisoun courted Jankyn, another young man without financial independence, whom she married after she became a widow for the fourth time. Then, the Wife broke her earlier rules of pragmatic marriage and wedded for love for the first time. Ironically, Jankyn’s condition was parallel to that of Alisoun’s with her former husbands, since he takes the position of power over her.

The second major theme in the Prologue is the Wife’s objections on theological teachings. Though a Christian, Alisoun does not trust the religious authorities’ interpretation of the Scriptures. She defends her right to remarry by recounting the biblical story of the Samaritan woman at the well who was living out of wedlock with a man after being widowed four times, and whom Jesus commanded to marry a fifth man. By doing so, the Wife of Bath goes against the common thinking of her time that since the Bible depicts Jesus attending only one wedding, perhaps this is God’s message that people should only marry once. Moreover, Alisoun also believes in God’s command to be fruitful and multiply. She disagrees with the Church’s teaching that chastity is preferable to second marriage. She believes that by sharing her bounty, she is closer to the real teachings of the Bible. Throughout these descriptions, the religious theme is intertwined with the marriage theme and Alisoun’s desire for autonomy. Although she recognizes that true autonomy for women in medieval Europe is an impossibility, she outlines her strategies for control of situations around her.

In the second part of the narrative, the Tale, the Wife of Bath reworks the traditional story of the Loathly Lady[[2]](#footnote-2) and approaches the theme of women’s sovereignty in a male society. The Tale begins with a rapist Knight being sentenced to death and a Queen granting power over his life. She gives him twelve-months and a day to find out what women want most. The price he is obliged to pay for the correct answer is to satisfy the lawful sexual appetites of an old and physically repulsive woman, the heroine of the Tale, an Elf Queen disguised as an Old Hag, a powerful artist, able to transform herself and gain mastery over her husband through her wise speech. In the ending of the Tale, the Knight saves his life and is rewarded by marrying the Hag, who transforms herself into a beautiful, faithful, and obedient wife.

Some authors argue that the Tale revolves around a decidedly feminist spin, putting the Hag in a position of control and demoting the Knight to a position of submissiveness (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984). According to these scholars, throughout the Tale, the Knight’s fate is decided by women, first by the Queen, then by the Hag. This confirms Alisoun´s assertion that a man’s true happiness can be realized only when he allows his spouse to have some level of autonomy. Nevertheless, other researchers point out that the end of the tale realigns the positions of power to more traditional gender roles, which undermines the feminist view (Hansen, 1988). However, according to the feminists, it is the woman’s own choice to be an obedient wife, and therefore the Tale provides a milestone for women’s quest for self-definition (Smith, 2014). Those commentators support the idea that in the Tale Alisoun is making a statement against prevailing beliefs that women are by nature base and sinful (Leicester, 1984; Smith, 2014).

1. **A woman ahead of her time?**

The character of the Wife of Bath has received the attention of scholars interested in the investigation of the feminist dimensions of her speech. She is considered unusually libertine and strong willed for medieval standards, both because she refuses to allow men to control her life and because she speaks freely about her ideas (Carter, 2003; Smith, 2014). However, the Wife of Bath is also criticized for being unable to succeed in her quest for independence from men due to her contradictory thoughts (Crane, 1987).

Some authors claim that Chaucer intentionally used this character to present his personal feminist ideals to his audience, “thereby acting as an advocate for women under the guise of literary author” (Smith, 2014, p. 76). According to this view, Chaucer did not create Alisoun as a mere form of entertainment, but as a subtle tool to help women be seen as something more than property (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984; Smith, 2014). Chaucer pushes the traditional ideas of what a woman should be during his time, and provides an outlet through which to plant the seeds of feminist understandings for his readers (Smith, 2014).

Moreover, Alisoun goes beyond the manipulation of husbands in her private life. She dictates the conversation within her Prologue while catching the attention of her audience with shock and awe, thus crossing the frontiers of gender roles in the public space. “This is an ingenious way to hold power, particularly feminine power, over both genders as readers. Hidden on the guise of comedy and absurdity, Chaucer was able to bring up the idea while blaming comedic creativity (…) in order to show his audience that woman are just as capable as men at thinking and acting in a dominant manner” (Smith, 2014, p. 78). In other words, Alisoun is not only able to hold sexual power over men, but also captures the attention of her readers since sexual power was unexpected for a woman in Chaucer’s time. In a time when the accepted mode of thinking was a strict patriarchal society, Chaucer was able to see the condition of women and create a character to show his understanding to a larger audience (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984). Smith (2014) compares Chaucer´s move to a modern day example: the way contemporary advertisement uses a sexy woman resting on the hood of a new car to sell the latest model: “Clearly, Chaucer was extremely smart in using sex partly as an attention grabber, and partly to covertly extend his feminist ideas” (p. 78).

However, the Wife is not simply a woman speaking her mind (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984; Straus, 1988). “She is a highly intelligent woman speaking her mind and using extensive biblical knowledge and quotes to back up her thoughts and feelings just as a man would” (Smith, 2014, p. 79). Alisoun defends her way of life by questioning some areas of the Bible, asking why it was so strange for a woman to marry more than once in her life if a man is permitted to have more than one wife at a time. Her biblical logic gives her the strength and power to continue living her life with the idea that sex is good and she intends to continuing having as many husbands as she can. She is a wealthy woman thanks to her marriages and she does not apologize or regret the way she lives her life. She enjoys the sovereignty that she has gained over her many husbands and encourages other women to follow suit. (Leicester, 1984; Smith, 2004).

Thus, in her Prologue and Tale, the Wife of Bath poses some questions to her readers: Why is virginity commanded? (65-120, 155-9) Why cannot women remarry? (9-34) Why do not women have the right to an opinion? (47-50)

1. **Marriage, sex and gender roles in patriarchal society**

In literature, the theme of marriage is traditionally associated with women. In the Wife of Bath´s case, the only difference is the outrageous way she speaks about sex, lust, adultery and domination. In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath refers to the purpose of genitalia. While they are used for excretion of urine and to differentiate women from men (127-8), they also have the purpose of pleasure and procreation. Alisoun’s argument is that while sex is something to be enjoyed, it is also frowned upon, a position that helps to clarify her self-identity: “Did somebody say no? / Experience knows well it isn´t so. / The learned may rebuke me, or be loth / To think it so, but they were made for both” (129-32)[[3]](#footnote-3). She realizes people know what else the genitals could be used for, and she is breaking the mold of a good Christian and a stereotypical woman by discussing these ideas at great length (Rigby, 2000), as she proclaims “they were made for both” (132). She is not embarrassed to say that she has had sex, enjoyed it and will continue to enjoy it until she can no longer have it.

Likewise, the Wife of Bath discusses the idea of one owing debt to their spouse, in a reaction to relationships where sex is not had as often as possible (Rigby, 2000). “Why else the proverb written down and set / In books: ‘A man must yield his wife her debt’? / What means of paying her can he invent / Unless he use his silly instrument?” (135-138)[[4]](#footnote-4). She is asking why more husbands do not offer to use their “silly instruments” (138) in ways other than urination and procreation. Moreover, her feministic traits are strengthened by her ability to talk about sex in a casual manner (Leicester, 1984). Such self-assurance to talk about sex reflects on her strength of womanhood. For some authors, what Chaucer is suggesting in this text is that women’s thoughts about marriage are as valid as men’s thoughts about marriage, and that women’s experience in marriage are a valid counterpoint to the authority of the writers who defend the idea that virginity stands above marriage (Leicester, 1984; Rigby, 2000).

On the other hand, there are authors that claim that, instead of being a revolutionary female figure with feminist intentions, the Wife of Bath merely seeks husbands who will provide for her in exchange for sexual favors (Hansen, 1988). For Alisoun, a good husband is “good and rich and old” (203). As she states to her audience, “I´ll have a husband yet / Who shall be both my debtor and my slave” (160-61)[[5]](#footnote-5). For the Wife of Bath, money, sex, and marriage are all intertwined and one cannot exist without the others. If she finds that a particular man is not giving her enough money, she simply withholds sexual favors from him. In this sense, there is nothing that distinguishes her behavior from that of a prostitute, despite the fact that there is a legally binding contract supporting her relationships. For these scholars, Alisoun is far from a feminist ideal, and is much more closely aligned with misogynistic stereotypes of medieval bad women (Crane, 1987; Hansen, 1988). Therefore, when the Wife of Bath states in her Prologue “I never would abide / In bed with them if hands began to slide / Till they had promised ransom, paid a fee: / And then I let them do their nicety” (415-8)[[6]](#footnote-6), she is not only confirming the stereotype of women as being obsessed with money and using their sexual power to obtain it, she is also proving to her audience that love is not something that a feminist woman is prone to (Hansen, 1988).

Still, some commentators allude to the fact that the Wife of Bath seems to have a plan for the Tale: She clearly intends to develop a story – changing a traditional myth to produce a polemical feminist moral – in order to support the narrative of her own life experience. According to Leicester (1984), this is the public meaning of a tale.

The Wife knows before she begins the story what she intends to do with it. (…) One way of looking at her Prologue is to see it as a process whereby the Wife’s account of her own experiences in marriage leads to her thesis about marriage in general. In this reading, her experiences allow her to say ‘The necessity of feminine *maistrye* is what my life proves, and so does the story I am about to tell. (…) Her life adds up to a final meaning which the Tale merely confirms. (Leicester, 1984, p. 159)

Thus, if on the one hand, the Wife of Bath is subversively shameless about her sexual exploits and the way she uses sexual power to obtain what she wishes, on the other hand, by doing exactly these things, she confirms negative misogynistic stereotypes and proves that women are manipulative and deceitful. Nevertheless, even though her actions might at first seem to be accommodated in the medieval male-dominated society, what she does is intentionally revolutionary in the debate of sex, marriage and the gender roles, and also empowering for women of her time.

1. **The Bible and the clerical teachings in medieval times**

Alisoun initiates a dialogue with the established authorities of the Church and by extension the political and social order, even while admitting she does not have the backing of those authorities. In order to do so, she invokes her knowledge of her own experience of the private, female, domestic world, a knowledge not considered of the same order as authorized knowledge (Leicester, 1984; Straus, 1988). The Wife of Bath is skillful in quoting biblical passages. However, if these passages may sound vaguely right, Alisoun’s excerpts are actually arguing something different from what was the prevalent teaching of Scriptures at Chaucer’s time. To some authors, the Wife does this to take a diametrically opposed stance to what most clergymen were saying about marriage and about women when they were using the exact same rhetorical strategy and quoting the exact same passages of the Bible (Hansen, 1998; Leicester, 1984; Rigby, 2000). In adopting this rhetorical strategy, Chaucer’s character draws attention to the power of preachers to shape the understanding of the bible according to the interests of the dominant male society.

Hansen (1998) notes that she asks her courageous questions to no one in particular, and to everyone.

We see again that generalized feeling that someone out there knows more than she does. Immediately afterwards, instead of rejecting authority that she does not understand or that conflicts with her own experience (whatever that may be), she proceeds to choose another “*gentil”* text to support her argument: “God bade us all to wax and multiply” (28)[[7]](#footnote-7). (Hansen, 998, p. 403)

This is all strategic on her part and brings humor to the speech, in order to underline a truth about the nature of power in her world:

God’s characteristic speech act is a command, created in His image, all men, even Christ, speak sharp words to women, for reasons that are purposefully obscure and obscured; and the Wife, along with all women, is told by received opinion that her behavior is wrong. She struggles to understand why, she seems to want both to subvert and to be right and good, and so she asks questions and tries to find or make authorities that speak on her side. (Hansen, 1998, p. 403).

Still, other authors affirm that, if one believes that the Wife of Bath is a character who shatters the misogynistic stereotype of women, one could imagine that she engages in well-informed and intelligent conversation. However, all she can offer is a twisted understanding of the Bible. In her Prologue, she states, rather arrogantly, that she too is capable of interpreting texts and that the Bible is not beyond her reach (Crane, 1987). Therefore, the problem with this is that she is not proving anything about her intelligence; she is merely trying to confirm or justify her loose behavior with the Scriptures.

Another argument by the detractors of a feminist view in Alisoun’s speech is that in her Prologue, the Wife of Bath does not try to present herself as a woman capable of independent thought and action; instead, she merely uses the Bible, a text associated with the male authority, to back up her assertions. In other words, she simply works from inside the patriarchy – rather than outside of it, as a feminist is expected to do – and only confirms negative stereotypes about women (Crane, 1987). For instance, at one of the points she talks about the Bible, she says: “Show me a time or text where God disparages / Or sets a prohibition upon marriages / Expressly, let me have it! ? Show it me! / And where did He command virginity?” (65-8)[[8]](#footnote-8). Here, she simply justifies her behavior with the Bible, and her botched interpretations make her appear more elusive than literate. It confirms the bad medieval stereotype that women are not capable of understanding the deep meanings of the Bible and that if they were given some education about it, they would only use it to justify sinful conduct (Crane, 1987; Hansen, 1988).

1. **Women’s sovereignty: a gender’s fight for domination**

The question of gender and sovereignty is a core issue in the Wife of Bath’s affairs. According to Rigby (2000), “Alisoun is a persuasive defender of the vision of equality in marriage achieved through the surrender of male sovereignty” (p. 134). The Wife´s narrative confronts the once dominant social belief that feminine power should be strictly limited, and it attempts to establish a defense of secular women’s sovereignty that opposes the prevailing conventions, mostly religious, at the medieval times. That, according to some authors (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984; Rigby, 2000; Straus, 1988), is a remarkable trait of the feminist tone of the text. However, Alisoun indulges herself in the attractions of power and argues that her active desire for it is justified by the benefits she wins from it and by the peace and happiness it will bring to men. This peculiarity provides criticism from those who recognize misogyny in Alisoun’s speech. “The illogicalities and confusion in her narrative are commonly attributed to her error: she is a parodic or comic figure who inverts accepted morality, or a sinful one who denies Christian teaching, and therefore she cannot argue cogently” (Crane, 1987, p. 20).

Nevertheless, whether or not she is comical or morally wrong, she is of interest from the perspective of her convictions that exist beyond medieval traditional discourses. The Wife of Bath clearly suspends the gender boundaries when she rules conversations in the same way a man would (Leicester, 1984; Straus, 1988). She has no problem with voicing her opinion and expecting others to listen. “She does not simply speak: she insists on asserting her right to speak: ‘If there were no authority on earth / Except experience, mine, for what it´s worth, / And that´s enough for me’ (1-3)[[9]](#footnote-9)” (Straus, 1988, p. 529). Thus,

Reassigning women to positions of authority traces the path of their transgression in the narrative itself. The power they exercise is not always benign or even admirable, since worthy female sovereignty is a concept Alisoun cannot fully articulate, but the gender shifts themselves loosen the bond between maleness and power that makes female sovereignty inconceivable (Crane, 1987, p. 25).

Hence, when she invokes her right to be taken seriously, she leaves the female territory of domesticity and silence to enter the grave world of public masculine discourse. (Straus, 1988)

In opposition, there are commentators that observe that there are many confusions in the Wife´s view. Crane (1987) points out that what Alisoun means by sovereignty is elusive, since the power it signifies seems to constantly vacillate. According to the author, some major contradictions can be distinguished.

Alisoun sometimes associates sovereignty with economic gain, “*wynnyng”* (416), yet she seems to win nothing from her fourth husband, gives up her gains to Jankyn, and makes the Hag speak eloquently against the significance of wealth. (…) Her conception of sovereignty seems to demand the trust of the high opinion of her husbands. “‘Go where you please, dear wife,’ you ought to offer / … / I know you for a virtuous wife, Dame Alice’” (318-20)[[10]](#footnote-10), she instructs her old husbands (…). Nonetheless, the Wife cheerfully undermines her demand for trust and respect by asserting and demonstrating that women are untrustworthy: “No one can be so bold – I mean no man - / At lies and swearing as a woman can.” (227-8)[[11]](#footnote-11) (Crane, 1987, p. 24-5). Crane (1987) also states that the Wife’s prologue “is based on antifeminist tracts, marital satire, biblical exegesis – a clerical mixture from which Alison draws life and departs like the Eve of amphibians leaving the sea while carrying its salt in her veins. (Crane, 1987, p. 20)

However, more important than resolving such dilemmas is the Wife of Bath’s insatiable quest for sovereignty. Crane (1987) agrees that what Alisoun shows is that while female power is not present or within reach, she will continue defying the medieval patriarchal standards. According to Smith (2014), “it is possible to assert that he (Chaucer) would have been cognizant of the profound inequities that women faced both legally and spiritually compared to men” (p. 78). Chaucer’s perception plays with notions of what constitutes “good” and “bad” as they are constructed by those in power in the male-dominant society. Even if a modern concept of feminism does not apply, the narrative clearly renders sympathy towards the harsh social and economic conditions of medieval women.

According to Smith (2014), the way Alisoun speaks of marriage is almost the same way one would speak of the past careers or jobs one has held. “Although the Wife’s Prologue may seem intimate because it concerns domestic life, all that she ever talks about is her profession – marriage. As a professional wife, she seems to command her search and marriages as a job, demanding the respect a boss would” (p. 81). While at first it may seem she only wants to control her husbands, it becomes clear she is after true sovereignty in the form of respect. It is important to remember the time period in which this was written and taking place. “With such a harsh view on women and an understanding they needed to be dominated or ruled over, this would be the only way in which Alisoun would be able to turn the tables. Respect demanded sovereignty be given, regardless of how harsh it comes across” (p. 81). Thus, sovereignty is a condition for respect. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath accomplishes it in her marriages, and thereby epitomizes the cause for a more equal society, perhaps bordering on matriarchal relations.

1. **Conclusion: to be and not to be**

In effect, the Wife of Bath is a character who deflects the attention of scholars interested in gender roles like no other woman does in medieval narratives. For starters, such an evidence should be enough to convince readers of the feminist lineament of the Wife of Bath’s picture. Nonetheless, literary academic debate on Chaucer’s character has not taken that statement for granted. On the contrary, a lot has been said both for and against the presumption of a clear feminist tone in Alisoun’s speech. Carter (2003) affirms that “If Chaucer is not actually endorsing the strident voice he gives to the Wife, he is certainly making play with textuality, with subjectivity, and with the construction of ideas about sexuality” (p. 328). In other words, Chaucer wrought the Wife of Bath in such a tactfully sophistication that her complexity ended up yielding her a prominent place in the history of literature.

To begin with, the Wife of Bath’s view on marriage, religion and gender roles – and the freedom with which she expresses her thoughts – has been highlighted as undisputable proof of a proto-feminist existence in the medieval literature. In addition, the controversial way she experiences life has largely served as evidence of the fight for women’s power that occurs inside a religious patriarchal society. Alisoun’s views on sex are remarkable, not only because she openly states her enjoyment of it, but also because she has used it as a tool to control her husbands. According to Smith (2014), “Women are not thought to enjoy sex. Thus, sex was used by men to control women. The Wife has found a way to change this traditional view in marriage, while turning the tables in control” (p. 79). The author also states that Chaucer has created both an entertaining character while instilling ideas that were far beyond his time, and certainly unheard of during the Medieval Ages. “The thoughts, feelings, and the experiences of women have not been blind to him, and the Wife of Bath has been a valuable tool by which to deliver some of the history of women’s oppression. His ideas are purely feminist in their behavior and execution” (p. 80).

Moreover, the Wife of Bath also attacks the religious pillar of a patriarchal society: Is the random use of biblical quotes an exclusive attribution of the clergymen (or any other dominant representative of any misogynistic society)? There is a political move when the Wife of Bath interprets the Bible the way she wants. In doing so, it is like she is saying that it is not only men, clergymen and other women oppressors who can interpret the Bible in the way that best favors their own interests (Straus, 1998). Thus, the misconception that women are weak, stupid and sinful is challenged by the Wife in her ability to both mentally and physically protect herself from the male dominance (Straus, 1998; Rigby, 2000). This is why in Alisoun’s Tale, the Knight-rapist and the King both move from having power to surrendering it, while women throughout the plot move themselves into male purviews.

On the other hand, there are authors that maintain that while it can be argued that the Wife of Bath could be an early feminist character, too many aspects indicate how she is working within the system rather than outside of it (Hansen, 1988). For instance, the Wife of Bath chooses to use the patriarchal structures of marriage and religion (especially through her discourses on the Bible) to her own benefit rather than seeking more meaningful changes. According to those commentators, for a medieval woman to be truly feminist or revolutionary, she must find a way to prove herself in a manner independent of men (Crane, 1987). Is perhaps Alisoun’s thesis more about curbing aggressive male dominance than it is about advocating female supremacy? In the Tale, the Old Hag gets the mastery only to surrender it again to her husband.

Nevertheless, this criticism has been widely rejected. There are authors who maintain that the fact that Alisoun misunderstands Scriptures is not so much an indication of a flawed intelligence (Carter, 2003; Hansen, 1998). To Smith (2014), it is an aspect of humor, since one could not expect of Alisoun, as we could not expect of any woman of her position in Chaucer’s time, the rigor of the scholar.

She would not have had appropriate training; she would not have had access to texts. What we do note about her, on the other hand, is that in spite of her scholarly deficiencies, in spite of her reliance on tertiary sources, she makes a vigorous intellectual effort to understand and to explain her life in terms of God’s purpose as revealed through scripture. (Smith, 2014, p. 80)

Thus, her misunderstandings of Scriptures are placed for comedic effect. Carter (2003) affirms that Alisoun is Chaucer’s voice, and, like her creator, she criticizes through comedy. Rigby (2000) explains that it is not only the Wife’s opinions and behavior that make her renowned:

Also her mode of speech, from the garrulity of her ‘long preamble of a tale’ (831), her chiding of her husbands (223), the sophistry with which she defends the superiority of women in marriage (441-42), to her skill in lying, her ability to trick her husbands (382, 391-92), and her love for gossip (531-33) (Rigby, 2000, p. 149).

The author also maintains that Chaucer promoted “a convincing refutation of medieval misogyny” (p. 157) defending woman in an ironical way. In this sense, Hansen (1998), although arguing against viewing the Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue as early feminist writing, proposes that the texts permit scholars to study the role of women in the fourteenth century and their attempts to claim a type of self-definition within the limitations of language and society. In Smith’s (2014) view, subtlety and humor were the available tools for Chaucer to deal with male readers who “likely would have closed his tales or chastised him for going too far with such tales” (p. 80). After all, in a metaphorical act of female dominance, the Knight-rapist clearly does need to repent and to be reformed in some way.

Therefore, what undeniably renders the Wife of Bath the title of a proto-feminist character is her urgency for sovereignty, despite the fact that some authors may reject Alisoun as a model for women´s independence. If, on the one hand, she does not seem actually interested in solving the medieval misogynistic gender challenge (Crane, 1987; Hansen, 1988), on the other hand, it is indisputable that she defies patriarchal standards like no other woman at her time (Carter, 2003; Leicester, 1984; Straus, 1988). Undoubtedly, if she fails in establishing a base outside and above the patriarchal society (Crane, 1987), she certainly puts in question the perceptions of gender roles in a male-dominant society (Smith, 2014; Straus, 1988).

Indeed, the authority against which Alisoun rebels is not that of any single person. The Wife defends herself against “a much vaguer force of social disapproval, powerfully unnamable, and her last attempts to meet specific arguments are self-defeating efforts to pin down and triumph over the generalized, mystifying, and hence invincible hostility that she meets from all sides” (Hansen, 1998, p. 402). Therefore, though clumsy, it is still an act of bravery. Leicester (1984) believes that Alisoun’s insecurity about her own life and fate is a projection of Chaucer’s own doubts about himself and the matters of his time. This vagueness and uncertainty is reflected in the opening lines of the Tale, as the Wife claims that she does not fully understand the meaning of the arguments against her way of life, although she understands the social and religious disapproval. Alisoun’s professed inability to understand the hostility against free-thinking women of her time serves both to challenge medieval patriarchal authority and to seal our contemporary uncertainty about the Wife of Bath’s actual feminist nature.

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1. Since discussing the concept of feminism is not the aim here, for the purpose of this paper the term feminism is used as the idea of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men. It is important to note that feminism is largely a modern term that came about in the 20th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Loathly Lady is an [archetype](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archetype) commonly used in literature. The motif is that of a woman that appears unattractive (ugly, loathly) but undergoes a transformation upon being approached by a man in spite of her unattractiveness, becoming extremely desirable. It is then revealed that her ugliness was the result of a [curse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse) that was broken by the hero's action. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “*And for noon other cause,-say ye no? The experience woot wel it is noght so. So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe, I sey this: that they maked ben for bothe*,” The excerpts used in this article belong to the translation into Modern English by Nevill Coghill, in: Chaucer, G. (1342-1400). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “*Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette, that shal yelde to his wyf hire dette? Now wherewith shoulde he make his paiement, if he ne used his sely instrument?*” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “*An housbonde wol I have I wol nat lette / Which shal be both my detour and my thrall*” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “*I would no lenger in bed abide / If that I felte his arm over my side/ Til he hadde made his ransom unto me*” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “*God bad us for to wexe and multiplye*” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “*Where can ye saye in any manere age / That hye God defended marriage / By expres word? I praye you, telleth me / Or where he commanded virginitee*?” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “*Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right Ynogh for me / To speke*” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “‘*Thou sholdest seye, Wyf, go wher thee liste / … / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys*’” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “*half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a woman kan*” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)