

Five British Writers

Day 5



Let's Discuss:

- A. How is the Wife of Bath's Prologue different from the prologues to the Miller's and Knight's tales?
- B. How does the Wife of Bath's tale represent the relationship between women and power? Compare this representation to the image of female intercession in the Knight's tale.
- C. Judith Butler asks the question "is drag the imitation of gender, or does it constitute the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?" With this question in mind, do you think we should consider the speaker of the Wife of Bath's tale to be female (the voice of the character) or male (the voice of the writer) or neither? Why?

Question A

The Wife of Bath's Prologue is different because...

The Knight doesn't even have a real prologue.

It's told by a woman.

It's lengthy, longer than the tale itself

It deals with her personal life, her autobiography, it's primarily a monologue

It shows pride, claims authority, explains her credibility

It's sentimental, the speaker is unreliable but not as much so as the Miller

There is no disclaimer by speaker or narrator, no apology

It's very talkative...like a soap opera...a more modern voice

It quotes religious references for support, it's also scatological but more philosophical, it holds intellectual theory, it's more serious... more realistic...

The interruption of Host comes at the end not the start

The prologue introduces the story, introduces the point of tale, the tale justifies her personal situation (as described in the prologue) rather than the other way around (as in the Miller's tale), there is little to no connection between prologue and tale besides speaker and her style

It could a subtler dig at the character than the obvious satire of the Miller's prologue, in creating a stereotypical female who can't stop talking...

Question B

Women and Power in the WBT

Women have “limited power,” always sought from men

Women show a “great display of power”

The tale is concerned with the exchange of power, and the difference between apparent and actual control: men seem to have power, but relationships fail when women aren't truly in power

The tale stereotypes women (as without power) yet shows them as having needs and a certain amount of agency (power) in seeking to fulfill these needs

The obedient wife at the end of the tale is a “double negative” in comparison to the tale's “feminist speaker,” who takes a revenge on the Friar at the start of the tale

Similar to the KT in that...

Women in all cases have power over their men

Both tales assume men having power is the normal state of affairs; women need to make special effort to get power

Both tales have manipulative women

Different from the KT in that...

The Wife has different power, of mind and of work (Prologue!)

Unlike Emilia, the wife uses sexuality as power (Prologue!)

The WB (Prologue!) presents a whole and balanced woman rather than women whose entire character is composed of swooning, crying, and outward beauty, passive and secondary characters

The women in the KT are more two-dimensional

The Wife/Hag is more shameless in her pursuit of power

The KT presents women as mere objects, but imagines them as less cunning and deceitful

Question C

mixture of male and female, both male and female elements... masculine fears but female needs and agency, neither fully male nor fully female... a fictional female persona created for amusement... an outside (male) and possibly more objective look at female gender

female because feminist

a female because so much of gender lies in presentation

a strong female voice...possibly satiric but it is less offensive for a faulty female voice to criticize women than a male one

emotionally and mentally female but physically either gender

leaning towards the idea of the wife as male... or a woman in a power suit, a female character acting as a man would

male because it is not intended as an accurate or honest portrayal of female voice... and much of the WBP may not even be about women

male because of need for power and because of wife's final promise of faithfulness in WBT

"I think there is a change in speaker between tale and prologue"

"Can this voice be read without gender?"

Cautions!

- Do all the textual reading before answering.
- Be sure you are discussing the right portion of the text (know the difference between a tale and a prologue).
- Only summarize plot points or quote from the text when it is necessary to advance your argument.
- Always run a spell-check and read out loud for typos *before* posting; use correct sentence structure, capitalization and punctuation.

Is the Wife of Bath the Misogynist Tradition in Drag?

“Gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real”
Butler

Misogynistic Tradition

- “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”
King James Bible, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35
- “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” *King James Bible*, 1 Timothy 2:11-12
- “There is hardly any other calamity more apt to do harm or that is more incurable [than the unbridled speech of women]. If its only consequence were the immense loss of time, this would already be sufficient for the devil. But you must know that there is something else to it: the insatiable itch to see and to speak, not to mention... the itch to touch.” Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, *De probatione spirituum*, 1415

Is the Wife of Bath a misogynist stereotype?

- She gossips: WBP 534-539
- She selectively quotes and misinterprets scripture, deliberately? WBP 154-161
- “The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.” 1 Corinthians 7:3-4
- “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” Ephesians 4:22-25

Is the Wife of Bath a critical perspective on misogyny?

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By god! if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of adam may redresse.

- WBP 688-96

Body and Text

What is the relation of Chaucer and the Wife of Bath? More broadly, how does gender shape our approach to text?

Medieval Texts:

- “glose” (WBP 119) texts, “glose” women (WBP, 509)
- “When thou goest forth to war against thine enemies, and the LORD thy God hath delivered them into thine hands, and thou hast taken them captive, And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife; Then thou shalt bring her home to thine house; and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails; And she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife.” *King James Bible*, Deuteronomy 21:10-13
- “Is it surprising that I, too, admiring the fairness of her form and the grace of her eloquence, desire to make that secular wisdom, which is my captive and my handmaid, a matron of true Israel?” Jerome, *Epistulae* 70

A Modern Editor:

“The editor, not unlike a bachelor choosing a bride, selects Line Form A for his text. For a time he lives in virtuous serenity, pleased with his decision. A year or more passes, and then one day it comes to him, like a bolt from the blue, that he should, of course, have chosen Line Form B; in short, he married the wrong girl. She is attractive, she is plausible, she has her points, but he just can’t live with her; he lies awake at nights enumerating her faults, which seem considerable when she is compared with her rejected rival, who now appears infinitely preferable. So the editor (who is the least reliable of all possible husbands) obtains a divorce... his marriage with Line Form B is now consecrated, and he settles down to live happily ever after. Then, after a year or so, Wife B begins to prove incompatible in a different and even more annoying way that Wife A ”

--Donaldson. from “The Psychology of Editors of Middle English Texts”

Gender Theory:

“trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably return the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position”

--Butler, from *Gender Trouble*

The Importance of Theory

- Agency
- Autonomy
- Dialectical
- Epistemic
- Ontological
- Performative construction
- Phallogentrism

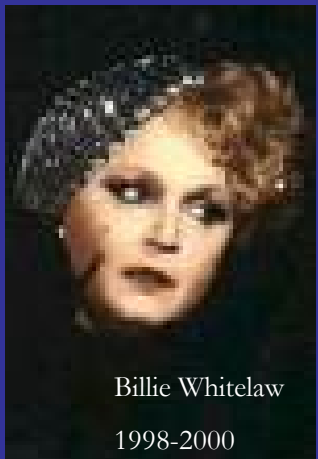


Ellesmere MS

Envisioning the Wife of Bath



Cambridge MS



Billie Whitelaw
1998-2000



Julie Walters 2003



Laura Betti 1972

Next: Exchange Values

For Thursday read *only* the Franklin's tale and the Rubin extract:

- More investigation of desire
- More rash vows
- More questions of justice and authority

How does human desire fit into other structures of exchange and power?