

Is that Sexual Innuendo?:

How The Wife of Bath Displays Female Intelligence through Euphemism

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Abstract: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* is regarded as one of Geoffrey Chaucer's better-known Canterbury Tales. Through her vivid details and critiques against man, the Wife demonstrates confidence and intelligence with which she approaches her sexuality. This paper examines how the Wife conveys her attitudes toward sexual activity and gratification via euphemisms — mild or indirect phrases to refer to something more blunt or unpleasant. It is important to consider the Wife's use of euphemisms in her discussion of her sexuality because they shed light on the female role in sex, as well as the importance of the female during sex. It is also important to question why the euphemisms were employed by Chaucer via the character of the Wife and not himself. The paper argues that the Wife confidently embraces her sexual desires, and in doing so, centralizes the importance of females in sexual activity. Furthermore, the Wife's centralization of females serves to reconfigure the power dynamics between females and males in sex as she promotes the dominance of females in sex (though it is important to note that sex is not exclusive to female-and male-identifying individuals). This reconfiguration ultimately has the potential to disrupt larger gender dynamics; the resurgence of female power and control is initiated in the bed as demonstrated by the Wife. The paper concludes that while the Wife embodies a strong and intelligent female, her influence may still be limited because she does not exist; she is a fictional character created by Chaucer, an influential man. However, this fact also suggests Chaucer believed women were to be just as in control of sex as were their male counterparts.

Many societies consider sexual intercourse taboo despite its role in everyday life. Those living during the Middle Ages, for example, understood that sex was important because it would fulfill God's command to "increase and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1), however "the pleasure associated with sexual activity" (Heckel, n.d., para. 1) caused great anxiety. Despite sex's taboo nature, the Wife in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* embraces her lust as she uses euphemisms to discuss the centrality of females and their bodies in sex, female sexual desires, and female control during sex. Written between 1388 and 1396, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* is part of Chaucer's collection of tales known as *The Canterbury Tales*, in which he highlights the never-changing fears of people across history through 31 characters (British Library). More specifically, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tales* deserves special consideration as it most prominently features rape law among all other tales. Moreover, it is important to consider this fact when reading the tale because it is speculated that Chaucer raped Cecily Chaumpaigne who dropped legal charges against him after allegedly receiving an out-of-court settlement from him (Harris, 2017, para. 5). The complexity of the text provides a unique opportunity to understand the motives of the Wife who seeks control of her sexual experience and pleasure. Furthermore, understanding the Wife's euphemisms is significant because they centralize females in the conversation and performance of sex, which is contrary to the sexual norms of the Middle Ages. Additionally, the text's euphemisms illustrate the Wife's intelligence, and therefore, understandings of female intelligence at large during this time.

Ultimately, the Wife employs euphemism to convey strong points about female autonomy and intelligence, particularly about the female exercising her free will to attain sexual freedom. Through this, the Wife challenges the patriarchal social structure of her time and the idea that males are to be pleased and in control during intercourse. In this essay, I will explain what euphemism is, illustrate instances in which the Wife uses the euphemism device and their implications, and discuss how instances of more explicit language work when juxtaposed with euphemisms.

A euphemism is a literary device through which a blunt expression is substituted with a milder one. Most, if not all, euphemisms in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* reference some aspect of sexual intercourse. For instance, the Wife references the vagina and the penis in her discussion of their multiple purposes when she asks "... and both our small things/ Were also to know a female from a male,/ And for no other cause — do you say no?" (Benson, n.d., lines 121-123). The "small things" are the vagina and the penis, which the Wife claims are used to distinguish a female from a male in the historical cis-gender binary. Identification of euphemisms requires careful attention to the context surrounding the euphemistic term or phrase. Moreover, euphemisms are important because they make a text complicated, leaving room for a reader's interpretation. Had the Wife been more explicit and used the actual names of these sex organs, we would not have the opportunity to question why she classifies the organs as "small" or "things." More importantly, we would not have the chance to inquire about the deliberate decision to soften the language. This choice is something I will tackle throughout the essay with selected examples of euphemism.

How the Wife Demonstrates Female Intelligence through Euphemisms

Intelligence has, unfortunately, been historically associated with the male as described by Stuber, who points to the early attribution of male intellectual superiority to assertions made by philosopher Aristotle and the Bible's explicit silencing of women in 1 Timothy 2:11-12

(Stuber, 2008). Intellect, however, comes in many different forms. The Wife of Bath demonstrates intelligence by using euphemisms, which ultimately provides her with a platform to specifically highlight female intelligence. Through her euphemisms, the Wife displays an awareness of gender dynamics, contradiction in patriarchal practices, and cognizance of her body and how it can be sexually pleased. Her display of female intelligence is significant to the understanding of females and the dismantlement of male dominance, particularly during sexual intercourse.

How the Wife Challenges Sexual Dynamics and the Patriarchy as she Argues the Centrality of Females and Vaginas during Sexual Intercourse

One instance through which the Wife demonstrates her intelligence is with her discussion on the importance of sex, in particular the sustenance it provides. For example, in her conversation about procreation and male disregard for virginity, the Wife states:

*Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
Let them be bread of pure wheat-seed,
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;
And let us wives be called barley-bread;
And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,
And yet with barley-bread, Mark can tell it,
Oure Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man.
Our Lord Jesus refreshed many a man. (Benson, n.d., l. 143-146)*

Here, she assigns “pure wheat-seed” to males and “barley-bread” to females. Is there sufficient difference between the wheat and barley grains to have one specifically attributed to males and the other to females? By understanding that barley flares open (Figure 1) and that wheat is long without any opening (Figure 2), the Wife employs euphemism to describe the vagina and the penis, respectively.

Figure 1
Illustration of the Two-row Barley Grain (Waldherr).



Note. The barley grain is depicted flaring open.

Figure 2

Illustration of the Wheat Grain (Waldherr).



Note. The wheat grain is shown. It is long and is not open.

In addition to using the grains to describe sexual organs, the imagery provided by the euphemism implies that the Wife views sex as a form of sustenance as she discusses the bread made of these two different grains. The original text, however, uses the word “breed” instead of “bread.” This strengthens the idea that the Wife is indeed referencing the sexual organs. The euphemism sheds light on women’s attitudes about sex because the Wife elaborates on the vital role females and female bodies play during sex.

Even as the Wife highlights the essentialness of sex, the euphemism has a deeper significance as the Wife argues that the vagina is the more important sexual organ. She writes about the nourishment the vagina provides as she states “And yet with barley-bread, Mark can tell it, / Our Lord Jesus refreshed many a man” (Benson, n.d., l. 143-146). In other words, the Wife claims the vagina, or “barley-bread,” refreshes or provides nourishment for man, even though barley was valued less than wheat during the Biblical era (Old Dominion University, 2007). In other words, the Wife argues that men would not be nourished without the sustenance the vagina, or “barley-bread” provides. Through this argument, the Wife stresses the importance of the vagina not only to the refreshment of men, but also to the sustainment of humanity.

How the Wife Claims Sexual and Societal Dominance by Assigning Strength to the Vagina

The Wife further illustrates the essentialness of the vagina when she later references it as her “instrument” (Benson, n.d., l. 149). This euphemism implies that the vagina is useful the way a tool is, and implies it is intricate like a musical instrument. Interestingly so, the translation writes that if she is stingy¹ with the use of her vagina during sex, God should grant her sadness. It is important to note that the original text uses “daungerous,” not stingy when writing about the Wife’s vagina. The use of “daungerous” provides important insight on the Wife’s perspective of her vagina during sex. By calling it “daungerous” the Wife implies she is prideful of the abilities

¹ The translation uses a different phrase to mean stingy which some may find offensive due to its visual and auditory resemblance to a racial slur (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., 1A., <https://www-oed-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/126928?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=P0dab8&>).

of her vagina. Thus, the original text grants the Wife and her vagina strength. It is important to consider “daungerous” since women and female genitalia were (and still are) regarded as weak and inferior to men and the penis. Additionally, the replacement of “daungerous” with stingy suggests the translator, Larry D. Benson, had some reservation around translating “daungerous” to “dangerous” as does the Oxford English Dictionary. Describing the Wife as stingy creates a negative view of her because it suggests she is hesitant about providing her husband with pleasure. Calling her stingy grants the Wife’s husband ownership of the vagina whereas “daungerous” maintains ownership and control of the vagina with the Wife. Thus, the Wife again exudes female intelligence, specifically in the original text, as she understands the power her vagina holds and retains her agency.

Along with highlighting the value of the vagina, the Wife reclaims her control and ability to feel pleasure during intercourse. She discusses how she “made them [men] work” the land and how men gave her “their land and their treasure,” which allowed her to “not work hard any longer” (Benson, n.d., l. 202-205). To clarify, the Wife’s statement on making men work the land suggests that she is boasting about her abilities in bed or on the “land.” Furthermore, the same statement suggests that the Wife is not in charge of performing the duties of sex because she does not have to “work hard any longer.” In other words, the Wife can relax and be pleased instead of having to “work” to please the male. The Wife flips the traditional narrative of males being the confident and dominant partners in bed to them being submissive under female dominance.

However, in other portions of the text the Wife does seem to uphold male sexual dominance. In addition to demonstrating her confidence in bed, the Wife discusses receiving men's “land and their treasure.” In this instance, “land” refers to men’s bodies and “their treasure” refers to their penises. This phrase contains considerable implications for the upholding of male dominance in bed. The use of “treasure” to reference the penis is noteworthy terminology that glorifies the penis. Though the Wife desires to be pleased by a penis and attains it after being given men’s “land and their treasure,” the glorification of the penis makes it appear as an ultimate prize that should be sought, especially since the Wife never references her vagina as a sort of prize, only as a useful “instrument.” Even so, the Wife may not be gratifying the male and their bodies at all. Her selection of “their land and their treasure” to reference the male could be a jab at the male ego. In other words, the Wife may be cunningly and intelligently using this phrase to mock the way in which men glorify their bodies and their penises, especially as she writes that she no longer works to respect them or “do them reverence” after receiving the land and the treasure. To clarify, her praising of men and their penises was only an act as she uses her wit and understanding of the male ego to obtain *her* treasure: sexual gratification. Thus, the Wife again demonstrates intelligence as she uses the ego of toxic masculinity on the masculine themselves to work in opposition to the male agenda of being dominant.

Despite the concern raised by her praise for the penis, the Wife further champions the feminine when she addresses the imbalanced gratification felt by male and females during sex. She consistently raises concern over her unsatisfied sexual pleasure through euphemisms — as seen with her previous point on the “debt” men have yet to pay her (Benson, n.d., l. 130). To illustrate, the Wife states:

*And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
And since they had me given all their land,
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,*

Why should I take care to please them,
But it were for my profit and myn ese?
 Unless it were for my profit and my pleasure?
I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,
 I set them so to work, by my faith,
That many a nyght they songen `Weilawey!'
 That many a night they sang `Woe is me!'
The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,
 The bacon was not fetched for them, I believe,
That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe.
 That some men have in Essex at Dunmowe.
I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
 I governed them so well, according to my law. (Benson, n.d., l. 212-219)

The Wife questions why she must care enough to please men's bodies to satisfy reasons beyond her "profit and her pleasure." She answers with "I set them so to work, by my faith" which shows how she disregards the patriarchal practice of women having to please men in sex as she made men please her on her own terms, or by her "faith." The supposedly laborious "work" she provides men with is reinforced by her account of them singing "'Woe is me!'" The singing implies that the Wife was indeed satisfied because she made the men work so much that they sang in distress (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., P2.). The Wife not only demonstrates the gain of her profit and pleasure, but she also again displays confidence in her performance in bed as she claims that she "governed them [men] so well" and that she "cruelly scolded" them in bed. Her consistent pride is interesting because it contrasts with male's pridefulness during intimacy. More specifically, being prideful with one's sexual abilities has mainly been associated with males, especially as men in heterosexual relationships equate their female partner's orgasm with their own sexual (in)abilities (Salisbury, 2013). Though the praise of the penis undermines the dominance of females and the vagina during intercourse, the Wife of Bath eventually reasserts her dominant stance by making men work the land and cry "'Woe is me!'" Ultimately, her intelligence is enhanced by her reassertion as the dominant partner because she demonstrates an understanding of how to control men to get what she wants: sexual gratification.

The Sexual Desires, Pleasures, and Displeasures of the Wife of Bath

As previously discussed, the Wife uses her understanding of the male, his tendencies, and his ego to establish her dominance over men and to receive pleasure from them. She further demonstrates her intelligence as she specifies her desires and what displeases her. For instance, she states:

For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,
 For profit I would endure all his lust,
And make me a feyned appetit;
 And make me a feigned appetite;
And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit.
 And yet in bacon (old meat) I never had delight.
That made me that evere I wolde hem chide,
 That made me so that I would always scold them. (Benson, n.d., l. 416-419)

The Wife discusses how she is unopposed to dealing with men's sexual temptations and posing a fake sexual desire, or a “feigned appetite,” as long as she makes a profit. By this statement, the Wife may be open to prostitution and while this could make her appear as scandalous and disloyal, such criticism comes from men who contradict themselves — which the Wife points out earlier in the *Prologue*. For example, she claims “But he [her husband] made no mention of number, / Of marrying two, or of marrying eight; / Why should men then speak evil of it?” (Benson, n.d., l. 30-34). To clarify, she mentions that her husband “made no mention of [the] number” of women he married and asks “Why should men then speak evil of” women engaging in more than one marriage. The Wife ultimately uses men’s lack of honesty to dismiss the criticism of women being “whores” for engaging in more than one relationship, and possibly prostitution, by exposing this hypocrisy. Whether or not she is involved in prostitution does not diminish her morality nor free will because she creates options for herself; to sleep with men who will satisfy her or to receive profit from men who may or may not satisfy her. In any case, she receives the compensation she desires and chooses who to sleep with, both of which are done under her conditions. This instance demonstrates the Wife's persistence in attaining pleasure because she does not settle for something she does not want.

She further demonstrates her sexual agency as she elaborates on what displeases her. The Wife reveals her taste in men and sex, particularly in her discussion of male anatomy. For instance, she mentions that she “never had delight” in “bacon (old meat).” Here, bacon serves as a euphemism for a penis as she clarifies that old men (and an old, presumably “worn-out” penis) would cause her so much dissatisfaction that she “would always scold them.” Her particular, not picky, desire for a certain penis again demonstrates the control and specificity with which she approaches sex. This specific desire enhances her strength as a female because it reveals the standards she sets for sex and the men she sleeps with. This depicts her as intelligent and powerful because she knows what she wants and knows where and how to get it; whether that's by choosing a certain man, and thereby a certain penis, or by receiving profit for sleeping with a man who will not meet her sexual desires. The Wife is in control and is satisfied in either case.

From Euphemisms to more Explicit Language: How the Wife again demonstrates Female Intelligence

As demonstrated, the Wife discusses the importance of females and their bodies during intercourse. Her sexual desires, pleasures, and displeasures illustrate her dominance and control of her sex life. This is important because it centers the female voice during intercourse in a way that was unusual for the time as the “active” partner would play the masculine role while the “passive” partner would play the feminine role (Karras, 2016). The Wife continues to place importance on the pleasure she desires as she mentions her pudendum in:

Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?

Is it because you want to have my pudendum all to yourself?

Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel!

Why, take it all! Lo, have it every bit!

Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel;s

By Saint Peter! I would curse you, if you did not love it well. (Benson, n.d., l. 444-446)

She tells the immediate man she speaks with that if he is so concerned with having her pudendum all to himself, he can, but he must “love it well” or she will curse him. The Wife does not submit her vagina to a man, rather she instructs and in fact demands that he please it well. In other words, the demand is specific because she instructs the man on how to treat her pudendum. This instruction supports the dominance she has over men during intercourse.

The University of Rochester Medical Center writes that the pudendum is responsible for providing most of the sensations and functions of the exterior vagina. Thus, not only does the Wife warn the man about not providing her with pleasure, but she is also specific about where one should concentrate on pleasing her. This highlights her intelligence because she is keenly aware of her body and how she is pleased. It also reinforces the authority she has over men and the authority she possesses during sex because she specifies how it should unravel; with her pudendum in this case.

In addition to bolstering her image as a strong and intelligent female through her reference to her pudendal nerve, the same reference prompts deeper inquiry: Why is the Wife explicit about the pudendum here when she employs euphemism in other parts of the *Prologue and Tale*? In other portions of text, she references her vagina as an “instrument,” “barley-bread,” and “my ‘pretty thing’” (Benson, n.d., l. 447). Here, however, the Wife is blunt as she points to the specific area of her vagina: the pudendum. Is she embarrassed about using the word “vagina” in other instances, but less embarrassed, even assured about using “pudendum” in this instance? Other references to her vagina deal with the act of sex, however they are not as direct or commanding about the way the Wife wishes to be pleased as the instance with “pudendum” is. To illustrate the significance of the Wife's explicit mention of her pudendum, I will explain the purpose behind selected euphemisms she uses in reference to her vagina, and later discuss why “pudendum” is different and why the term deserves special consideration.

When the Wife mentions her vagina by using the term “barley-bread” in line 149, she discusses the importance it has in the refreshment, satisfaction, and nourishment of men. She later uses “my instrument” to reference her vagina, which again contributes to its utility in sex. Lastly, by using “my ‘pretty thing’” to reference her vagina, she is presumably jabbing at males who use this condescending term to reduce the vagina to its appearance and a “thing.” The first two euphemisms deal with the essentialness of the vagina and the third euphemism deals with a reclaiming of the vagina.

The explicit term “pudendum” is specifically used for discussing the Wife's pleasure, however. Euphemisms are used when talking about the functions of sex (the way wheat, barley, and an instrument create imagery related to the anatomy of sexual organs) and men's thoughts about the vagina (“pretty thing”) while blunt language is used by the Wife when she demands that her pudendum be pleased. Because pudendum deals with arousal and because the Wife wants men to “love it [her pudendum] well,” this suggests the Wife wishes to be precise and careful when it comes to being pleased; when she seeks pleasure, she wants to make sure the man delivers and thus uses more straightforward terms like “pudendum.” In other words, she provides the man with instructions, a diagram even, through mention of this term; she wishes to be as clear as possible so that she does not risk being unfulfilled with his performance in bed. Ultimately, the Wife uses euphemism to discuss the functions of sex and uses more explicit language to ensure she is sexually pleased. This demonstrates the Wife's seriousness about attaining sexual satisfaction.

While the image, and thus clarity she provides aids her in making sure she will be satisfied, the Wife also grants herself the burden of detailing instructions for the man's

performance. More specifically, though she provides herself with some reassurance that she will be satisfied, the clarity she creates with “pudendum” strips the man of his responsibility of understanding the female body and how it is pleased. Though satisfied, the Wife remains at a loss because she is tasked with the labor of outlining how she wants to feel and how it will be achieved. In this way, can the Wife and women at large ever “win” when it comes to sex, that is, can they ever purely enjoy sex without needing to provide labor?

Is any of this Real?

Even as the Wife of Bath illustrates female intelligence through her understanding of the female body and gender dynamics during intercourse, is it possible to assume any of this is valid or real knowing that *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* was written by male author Geoffrey Chaucer? Is it possible to claim that the text demonstrates female intelligence when a female did not write the text? I do believe the claim is valid, though acknowledging that a male wrote the text provides room for further speculation about the purpose of euphemism in the text. Perhaps Chaucer believed women were to speak in a certain, “lady-like” way. Or, like mentioned at the beginning of the essay, Chaucer may have felt anxious about discussing sex, which prompted his decision to speak about sex through euphemism. If Chaucer did in fact wish to censor the discussion of sex and the female voice, the *Prologue and Tale* remains insightful because it demonstrates how Chaucer portrayed women as intelligent, and by doing so, he possibly believed women were to have as much influence in sex as men.

In closing, the Wife of Bath remains an important literary and feminine figure because she challenges traditional sexual practices such as binarized gender dynamics during intimacy and the prioritization of male pleasure during sex. The Wife not only works to elevate the female perspective and her sexual desires, but she also highlights the intelligence of women in doing so because she displays how in tune she is with her body through her understanding of different parts of the vagina, and because she understands how to use male tactics of undermining women against them as she reaps her desired sexual gratification. Although the euphemisms may appear as nothing more than complaints about literal situations — such as having to work the land — upon first glance, understanding that these situations as euphemisms grants perspective on a female’s insight about sexual intercourse, gender roles in sexual intercourse, and the intricate layers of Chaucer’s writing.

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