

Impossible Choice

You have two choices; which one will you try?

To have me old and ugly till I die,

But still a loyal, true, and humble wife

That never will displease you all her life,

Or would you rather I were young and pretty

And chance your arm what happens in a city

Where friends will visit you because of me,

Yes, and in other places too, maybe.

Which would you have? The choice is all your own. (291)

The above passage comes from Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, toward the end of "The Wife of Bath's Tale". Dismayed because he feels he has been tricked into marrying an old hag, the knight feels unable to consummate his marriage. The old woman attempts to force him to choose between a woman who is "old and ugly...loyal true, and humble" and one who is "young and pretty" but susceptible to, and the object of, other men's attentions. The Wife of Bath thus uses this story to highlight her own frustration and anger over the rigid stereotyping of women into a virgin/whore dichotomy. Her Tale becomes a fantasy in which she is able to place a man into this feminine predicament. Tempting as it is to laud Chaucer as an early feminist, capable of seeing women as fully human, it must be noted that this laying bare of the impossible choices women are given is embedded within a story whose moral seems to be that

women desire control of and power over men. The Wife of Bath goes beyond wanting to be seen as a complex individual on equal standing with men. She wants to usurp the status quo and assume the position of power herself.

This status quo is already being usurped in the Prologue. Alison, the Wife, whose presence on this pilgrimage alone makes her stand out as an unusually independent woman, tells her listeners of her increasing ability to manipulate men through not just one but five marriages. Her final marriage to Johnny, a man just half her age, is particularly striking. At a time when death due to childbirth complications made it not uncommon for a man to have a series of young brides, it was indeed an anomaly to have a woman in a comparable position. Johnny is, additionally, educated-- a vehicle to power not then available to women. Chaucer is thus able to use Johnny as a mouthpiece through which Alison learns how those in power—the clergy, educated and wealthy men—depict women. Reading to her from his “book of wicked wives,” Johnny harangues Alison with biblical and mythic stories of evil, one-dimensional women (276-279). Alison’s understanding of the virgin/whore dichotomy is reflected in her comment:

...there is no libel

On women that the clergy will not paint,
Except when writing of a woman-saint,
But never good of other women, though. (277)

It is a trap that Alison feels captured in, and it infuriates her. “Who could imagine,” she says, “The torture in my heart” (279)? This anguish leads her to a revolutionary act laden with symbolic overtones. She rips the offending pages from Johnny’s book. In doing so,

she rips asunder the version of women created by clergy and ancient scholars. Her Tale can be seen as an attempt to rewrite the story.

It is significant that Alison sets her Tale in Arthurian times and makes a point of the fact that it is the fairies not the friars who wield power. While priestly power is associated with men, magical thinking often invokes images of old women and pretty, feminine fairies. The Wife's Tale is a clever overthrow of the medieval power situation. In her story it is the queen, her ladies and the old hag who are given power, and it is the knight who is forced into the same set of rigid choices that was available to medieval women. This is revolutionary politics, no less powerful for having been delivered in the guise of being only "offered to amuse" (263).

Contemporary sensibilities, while amused by the Wife's bawdiness and approving of her rejection of stereotypes, are often uncomfortable with her stated desire for "Sovereignty / Over her husband" (286). Ultimately, the knight cannot make the choice and capitulates to his wife's control. "I leave the matter to your wise decision," he says, and the old hag revels that she has "won the mastery" (291). This mirrors the end of the Wife's Prologue, where Johnny ends up telling her, "Do as you please for all the rest of life" (280). Today's utopian visions tend toward a society where power is shared, where men and women stand on an equal footing. It is, however, small wonder that Alison comes to view equality with men as an impossibility. Depicting women as "[Children of] Venus" and educated men as "Children of Mercury," she notes that "Mercury is desolate...where Venus is exalted, / and Venus falls where Mercury is raised, / And women therefore never can be praised / By learned men." (277). Alison, ironically, is guilty of her own kind of rigid thinking. She sees the male/female relationship as an in-

power/out-of-power dichotomy. Like the planets, if Venus is in ascendancy, then Mercury must be descending. For her, the two *cannot* meet; sexual equality is about as possible as stopping the movement of the planets. This helps explain why Alison, in her Tale, goes beyond the equality which would sit more comfortably with today's readers.

How apt that Chaucer's tale continues to point out the human tendency to categorize people rather than view them in all their complexity. Must we either extol The Wife of Bath as a protofeminist or condemn her as a bossy, power-hungry hussy? Chaucer's poem traces the impossible choice back to its biblical and mythic roots. Its trajectory shoots right through the medievalists and into the present day, where The Wife of Bath still cries out to be understood for the complex character that she is.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. Translated into Modern English by Nevill
Coghill. London:Penguin Books, 1951.