

I AM NOT LIKE THOSE “OTHER” GIRLS:  
DECONSTRUCTION OF SUPERFICIAL FEMINISM IN CHAUCER’S WIFE OF  
BATH AND YA FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

by

Amrin Madhani

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Thesis Supervisor:

Leah Schwebel

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## **DEDICATION**

*The pages of a book are the doorway to meeting powerful people and to realize when the last page is turned, I am the most powerful in my own right. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for giving me these books so that I could be as powerful as the heroines I admired. I could not possibly thank you enough for everything you both have done for me. I hope this thesis serves as a badge of honor for all the hard work and love you poured into the pages of my life.*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay takes a comprehensive look at critic responses of Chaucer's Wife of Bath and deconstructs the arguments supporting Alisoun of Bath as a pro-feminist character. My thesis is comprised of two major parts. The first part attempts to review arguments made by scholars who read the Wife of Bath as a pro-feminist character and explain how they are misinterpreting her. The second part will extend that conversation into the Young Adult Literature genre as a way to show how anti-feminist rhetoric is similarly misunderstood in modern female characters. The important distinction I am making in my thesis revolves around trying to explain how narratives of false feminism are upheld by people who constantly engage with these texts (i.e. Medieval Literature, or YA Literature respectively). I will address my point by demonstrating how YA female protagonists echo the superficial feminism found in Wife of Bath to help the readers catch potential misogynistic themes and tropes present in these popular books. By extending this conversation from Wife of Bath, a prominent character in Medieval Literature, into a genre dominated by young female protagonists, I anticipate that more readers will properly identify the subtle ways in which the female protagonist maintains the patriarchal *status quo*. It is easier, in my opinion, to accept that female representation in Medieval Literature was gendered. So, by showing the similarities of the characters and how critics responded to those texts I would like to highlight that modern readers have not yet conquered removing false feminist from books.

## INTRODUCTION:

*“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.” – Audre Lorde*

Feminism is an everchanging concept; constantly being redefined and materialized for the needs of the women invoking equality. It’s a social movement that has influenced the development of feminist literary criticism. This literary theory attempts to look at the portrayal of women in various texts and discuss the ways female representation hurts or further oppresses women in society. Women in literature have often been depicted conforming to traditional gender norms while supporting the patriarchally aligned cultural narratives. Modern scholars have heavily studied gender and heteronormativity in classic and contemporary literature, and my thesis builds on those studies and expands it to female protagonists in YA Literature. To do this I draw on Geoffrey Chaucer’s Wife of Bath as a parallel to modern YA heroines to discuss misinterpretation of false feminists.

My thesis is comprised of two major parts. The first part attempts to deconstruct arguments made by scholars who read the Wife of Bath as a pro-feminist character and explain how they are misinterpreting her. The second part will extend that conversation into the Young Adult Literature genre as a way to show how anti-feminist rhetoric is similarly misunderstood in modern female characters, just like it was for Wife of Bath. The important distinction I am making in my thesis revolves around trying to explain how narratives of false feminism are upheld by people who constantly engage with these texts (i.e. Medieval Literature, or YA Literature respectively). To be clear, I am not arguing that YA Literature is informed by Medieval Literature, or that YA female

protagonists are an extension of the Wife of Bath, but rather to assess the similarity of the response made by people who have misinterpreted these texts and claim that these characters embody feminist ideals, when in reality they are actually perpetuating misogynistic rhetoric. At this moment you might be asking yourself, why should I care about YA Literature? Everyone knows not to take these books seriously, so why try to talk about it when I could just focus on Wife of Bath? The short answer is because the conversations around these characters are eerily similar. We have falsely assumed that feminism in the twenty-first century has eradicated the presence of patriarchally focused storyline, however, that is not the case. Heroines like Bella Swan (*Twilight*), Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter*), Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*), and Feyre Archeron (*A Court of Thorns and Roses*) are constantly undermined by their male co-protagonist to the point where their agency in their own books is questioned. The Wife of Bath is a great character to compare modern female YA characters with because in our modern society, we have somewhat accepted that the portrayal of women in Medieval literature to be gendered and represented with anti-feminist tropes. With that in mind I will construct a parallel between pro-feminist responses of Wife of Bath and YA heroines in juxtaposition to the perpetuation of misogynistic rhetoric in their characters to highlight how misevaluation of a female protagonist results in a false narrative of feminism that is then upheld as an ideal. I will address my point by demonstrating how YA female protagonists echo the superficial feminism found in Wife of Bath to help the readers catch potential misogynistic themes and tropes present in these popular books. By extending this conversation from Wife of Bath, a prominent character in Medieval Literature, into a genre dominated by young female protagonists, I anticipate that more readers will

properly identify the subtle ways in which the female protagonist maintains the patriarchal *status quo*. It is easier, in my opinion, to accept that female representation in Medieval Literature was gendered. So, by showing the similarities of the characters and how critics responded to those texts I would like to highlight that modern readers have not yet conquered removing false feminist from books.

## 1. Illusion of Bath

One of the most paradoxical characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is the infamous Wife of Bath. She first appears in the General Prologue where she is described as deaf, gap toothed with an affinity for cloth making. She is presented to the readers as someone who flaunts herself with red clothing while going on pilgrimages and talks as if she is one of the most liberated and well-informed women of her times. She is somewhat average looking but is remarkable in her craft of making textiles. Alisoun of Bath speaks of her five husbands, mostly all of whom she's married were old and rich, so she comes off as a modern gold-digger. In her prologue and tale Alisoun of Bath is expressive about her sexual encounters with her husbands and how she is able to keep her emotions out of the actual relationship (as implied when she finds herself attracted to Jankyn at her fourth husband's funeral.) The focal point of Alisoun's character is her defiance against male "auctoritee" and depending on herself because of her "experience," both in sexual terms and maturity.

The Wife of Bath's lengthy prologue talks about how she is an expert in the matters of marriage and womanhood because she has had five husbands at "the Church door." She also strongly believes that experience has greater influence than authority which is precisely why she has been able to take care of herself and her finances so well. She also advocates that women are able to understand their positions in society and demands that they have more equal footing in decision making- especially when it comes to her body. Often many people would ask her if it was moral for her to be married so many times, but she successfully refutes them with stories from the *Bible*. The Wife of Bath defends her position by asking where in the Bible or any religious documents does God explicitly

command virginity? She further explains that sexual organs were made so that men and women could enjoy sex and reproduce. Why shame women for enjoying sex, if it weren't meant to be enjoyed?

Sentiments about sexual liberation and equality in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale are what draws scholars (Evans & Johnson, Carruthers, Rigby, Carter, Zhu) to interpret the Wife of Bath as a pro-feminist character. She purposefully subverts the traditional gender norms of women needing to stay as chaste as possible, even if they are widowed, and uses her experience to reign in her husbands. Alisoun of Bath is able to recognize how she needs to alter her behavior to gain her husband's trust so that she can have an upper hand over their marriage. In theory, the Wife of Bath seems to be diverging from the hegemonic society of the Middle Ages but the feminism in Chaucer's Wife of Bath is largely performative. It's an illusion because the Wife is a compilation of every negative stereotype of women in the Middle Ages. Thus in speaking, the Wife of Bath attempts to overcome, and is yet caught in, the double bind of endeavoring to give voice to distinctively female experience in the face of authority and audience whose values and expectations are overwhelmingly male. In this next section I will discuss emerging theories and scholars who have advocated that the Wife of Bath deserves to be known as a feminist character. After addressing their claims I will deconstruct them and argue why they fail to meet feminist standards for modern literary critics.

### 1.1. Finding False Feminism

The appeal of a feminist Wife of Bath comes largely from how the character herself asserts her position as controlling of the outcomes in her relationship. Alisoun of Bath is able to establish her agency by giving herself the power to claim that her experience is

the basis of her authority. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson in their book *Feminist Readings in Middle Ages*, claim that the Wife of Bath “can be read as the epitome of a modern feminist, insofar as she claims that experience is the ground of her authority, thus reversing the hierarchy which devalues ‘feminine’ experiences and privileges ‘masculine’ authority.” They further address that the Wife of Bath has this distinct voice that constitutes as this “tone of resistance,” allowing readers to perceive her as defiant of traditional gender norms. Another scholar, Mary Carruthers, also identifies Alisoun as having agency in terms of her economic welfare. She argues that it is not just her husband’s money that keeps her affluent but instead her cloth making business and the maintenance of her social life. Carruthers firmly believes that the Wife of Bath was incredibly profitable in her business which “passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt” (*GP*, 450). This accumulation of wealth and “Chaucer’s enthusiastic appraisal of her professional worth” (Carruthers) is not an overstatement. We can clearly see how much money she earns because of how extravagant her travels and pilgrimages are. The fortune she commands is enough so that she can do whatever it is she wants without it hindering her in any way. It is not difficult to believe that the Wife of Bath is someone who has agency. Critics such as S. H. Rigby explains the reasoning behind Wife of Bath’s feminist readings are due to how the Wife arguments are a plausible defense of women against misogyny which was so prevalent in Medieval culture. “She is thus presented as a perceptive critic of misogynist orthodoxy who beats male scholars at their own game and creates her own authoritative position from which to speak in defense of her sex and to convince us of her views” (Rigby).

These scholars, while making enticing arguments, mistake her defiance of authority as a mode of agency because they assume that by refuting the conservatism of fourteenth century gender norms, she is breaking some sort of barrier. I was also tempted by the idea of a feminist Wife of Bath, but as I learned about the pillars her character was founded on, I realized that there was no feminist stronghold. To refute Evans and Johnsons claim that Wife of Bath is reversing gendered hierarchy, I would say that the Wife does not successfully reverse the roles. She does not have true authority over her husband, nor does her faerie hag have any authority over the rapist knight. In fact, Alisoun may feel entitled to proposition her authority over herself, her sexual liberties, and her husband, however, her prologue and tale largely contradict what she says.

Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale may immediately seem find superficial spaces that suggests a liberal agenda. Afterall, she has been married five times and expresses her sexual liberation without shame to the rest of the pilgrims in attendance. She also advocates that women should not be inferior to men and have equal weight in decision-making. Alisoun recognizes the importance of her personal experience and draws on them to make well-structured arguments about marriage educated by the Bible. Scholar Laurie Jacobs fortifies this view by asserting that Chaucer was successful in representing a "relatively fair feminist view of the Medieval woman's plight by employing wit and individual expression." She claims that the Wife of Bath is an antithesis of negative stereotypes of women at the time and that Alisoun is purposefully parodying to those anti-feminist writings, especially when it comes to gaining sexual pleasure.

Consider this passage from the Wife of Bath's Prologue (Mann, 213)

*What rekketh me, theigh folk seye vileninye  
Of Shrewed Lameth and his bigamy?*

*I woot wel Abraham was a holy man,  
And Jacob eek, as fer as evere I kan,  
And ech of hem hadde wives mo than two,  
And many another holy man also.  
Where kan ye seye, in any maner age,  
That heighe God defended marriage  
By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me.  
Or where commanded he virginitee?  
(Ed. Jill Mann, III 53-62)*

From this passage above, the Wife emphasizes that her actions are not as outrageous as men would like to posit since “Holy Men” have had multiple wives in the past. She also asks men to prove where God emphasized the need for virginity even after a woman has been wed once. By using Biblical allusions to center her argument, Alisoun makes it clear that she is well-versed in how to use the Bible for her benefit, similar to how men have been using Biblical texts to uphold their patriarchy. Her proposition in this verse aligns with the modern notion of gender equality where one gender shouldn’t be ostracized over the other if both genders are doing the exact same thing. Equality between genders is positively a feminist discourse, but the Wife’s prologue and tale increasingly plays on Chaucer’s ability to manipulate what he says. In the latter half of the Wife’s prologue, Alisoun of Bath tells the reader her life story about how she was wed five times and that it was her fifth husband, Jenkyn, that she loved the most. In her description of her abusive relationship- she is somehow not aware of the violence being perpetrated against her- Alisoun brings up the *Book of Wikked Wives* (III, 685) and describes it as this cursed book that has entranced her husband. Interestingly enough Alisoun is able to refute many of the teaching of that book by professing how many of

the women in these epic tales were disparaged for the betterment of the man. In lines 693, the Wife states

*By God, if women hadde written stories,  
As clerks han withinne hir oratories,  
They wolde han write of men moore wikkednesse  
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse!*  
(Ed. Jill Mann, III 693-696)

If women were given the proper agency, they deserved then the world would know that the true villain is actually the man.

Ironically, the whole persona of the wife is performative. As literary critics we have to remind ourselves that at face value the tale is being told by Alisoun, Wife of Bath, however, the real storyteller is Chaucer. It would be an anachronism to believe that Chaucer is writing Wife of Bath in a pro-feminist technique. The character herself should be evaluated in an iconographic sense because she was written by and for a man whose stance of feminist progressiveness would have been severely limited to gendered social structures. The irony, as literary critic Tony Slade suggests, is “that the Wife of Bath is herself the fictional creation of a male author, and many of her attributes are derived from the sort of books she describes.” She is a contribution to the tradition of “male authored misogynistic literature,” (Slade). Alisoun of Bath is fully informed not by the needs of women in medieval society, but by the negative stereotypes and assumptions made by men about women. One of the characteristics of an unruly wife is how she rambles and talks to the point of exhausting the listener (Leicester), and that is exactly how Chaucer writes the prologue to Wife of Bath. It’s increasingly long, with lengthy drawn-out

explanations and radical thinking; men who are listening to her would not take her seriously. In fact, she is interrupted by both the Summoner and the Friar and egged on to take the story instead of rambling on about her frivolous life.

In her tale, the Wife of Bath tells the story of a knight who rapes a young maiden in the fields. Brought to the courts, this disgraced knight is sentenced to death, however, the queen interjects and offers a path out if the knight agrees to answer one question. If he gets this question right the Knight will be free, but if he answers incorrectly death is most certain. The queen commands him to find the answer and she will “*gaurente thee lif, if thou kanst tellen me, what thing is it that women moost desiren,*” (Mann, III 905-906). Immediately the knight is given a year to travel in search for the absolute one thing women desire. For the duration of the year, this knight undergoes a process of reeducation and reformation in his quest to discover the answer. When the knight has exhausted all methods, he comes across an ugly old hag that promises to give him the answer he is looking for in exchange that he do one thing that she requests. Hastily agreeing to this proposition the knight then finds himself in a marriage with this ugly old hag. He is absolutely repulsed by her, but she reprimands him by reminding him that had she been a beautiful woman she would have most definitely cheated on him. The knight agrees she is correct and submits his will to her, which is then rewarded because the ugly hag turns into this beautiful maiden. Anne McTaggart explains that this scene is grossly misinterpreted. She says,

“Thus, the knight’s quest to discover women's desire concludes, ironically, with the fulfillment of his own "worldly appetit." I open the present essay with the lines uttered by the ugly old woman before she magically

transforms herself into the object of the knights desire in order to highlight the way in which the tales conclusion signals a crucial aporia: insofar as the old woman's claim that women desire sovereignty above all is undermined by her surrender of sovereignty to her young husband” (McTaggart 42).

The parallels between the Wife’s Prologue and her tale occur at several points, “particularly in reiterating the male surrender of masterie: the rapist knight surrendering masterie to the magical “loathly lady” just as, in the prologue Alisoun’s husband surrenders to her,” (McTaggart). The tale has been identified as a “counter-exemplum” for Alisoun’s claim that women are not horrible creatures as written in the *Book of Wikked Wives* however, this tales serves more as wish fulfillment story (Thomas) than an actual contest against stories in the *Wikked Wives*. Susan Crane, in her essay “Alison’s Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath” asks us to contemplate this: “The kinds of power Alison designates as ‘sovereignty’ vacillate contradictorily, in part because she confronts generic and ideological differences on the issue. Her tale analyzes a belief that informs both antifeminist satire and romance: that gender sets limits on personal capability and social power.” Wishful thinking is one of the main elements on the Wife of Bath’s tale, however, the reader mistakes this as a call for change. Alisoun is not concerned with liberation because of her fixation on marriage. Throughout the prologue and tale she claims that it is sovereignty a woman most desires, but the woman is still bound by marriage, still bound by the need to have a male in her life and bound to the idea that the need to be dominant is most superior. The final, and in my eyes the most important, blow to her theory of liberation comes from the end of her tale. The old hag

completely gives herself to the knight as a “reward” for giving up his sovereignty, but it’s more the other way around. By submitting to the knight, the hag in the story gives up the hold she has over him! As readers we should be extremely doubtful of her actions, especially when she says:

*“After that day we hadden never debaat.*

*God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde*

*As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,*

*And also trewe, and so was he to me.”*

*(Ed. Jill Mann, III 1255-58)*

Chaucer has deliberately misled modern readers about the true intentions of this tale- a common pattern for all of his tales. Medieval readers would have picked up on this subtlety, but why do modern reader try really hard to make the Wife of Bath a feminist character when everything about her is based off of negative stereotypes? Her tale is a manifestation of Alisoun’s illusion and confidence in herself. She is exactly the wife a woman did not want to become.

The Wife of Bath is a perfect example of superficial feminism because she calls on liberation and tries to reclaim her life as being separate from the male centric world, however, she contradicts herself by continuously putting the needs of the male (the knight, or her husbands) before her own while simultaneously advocating for marriage, which is the biggest institution that oppresses women- both in the Middle Ages and the modern twenty-first century. Her needs are pushed aside for the development of her male equivalent, whether it be her husband or the knight. The redemption of the male figures in Alisoun’s life and tale erase the small power that she was gaining and destroys the

things she was advocating for. By accepting the faults and misdeeds of these men (domestic abuse from Jenkyn and rape from the knight), the Wife of Bath inserts herself back into the patriarchally dominated society effectively demolishing her agency and liberation.

## 2. THE PATTERN OF FAUX FEMINISM

My analysis of the Wife of Bath reveals that outward expressions of agency and liberation may sound pro-feminist, however, judging by the actions of the Wife in connection to male figures in her prologue and tale exposes the subtle ways in which misogynistic rhetoric slips in. This slippage is surprisingly also very common in YA female protagonists in speculative fiction. These heroines, like the Wife of Bath, lure readers with a promise to deliver stories and action that does not conform to traditional gender roles. There is a challenge presented to the reader that the YA female protagonist is going to overcome through the use of her wits, intelligence and strength. This female character does not need a man to do the job for her, and if there is a male character in the story, he serves to be the romantic partner of this woman. The problem these books posit is that once the author makes it clear that romance is going to be one of the focal points of the story, any character development or plot growth is sustained purely for the “happily ever after.” In books, or series, where romance is a sub plot, female characters are almost always bound by the needs of the male protagonist. By this I mean that female characters have to drastically renegotiate their importance in crucial decision making while the male characters forcibly impose their importance in the said situation. This gendered division is most likely to be observed in dystopian or fantasy novels where the main character (regardless of the gender) must follow a Hero’s journey. The rise of the dystopian/fantasy novels in the twenty-first century, between 2012-2016, revitalized the genre for modern readers with “the influx of new, young protagonists who are fighting to save the world from oppressive forces,” (Scholes and Ostenson). More importantly this genre gave female protagonists the opportunity to be in the frontline of action.

Protagonists like Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games Trilogy*), Tris Prior (*Divergent Trilogy*), and Cassia (*Matched Trilogy*), have become popular icons amongst readers, so much that these books inspired their Hollywood counterpart movies. These series offer prominent female characters the ability to “claim their identities . . . [and] attempt to recreate the worlds in which they live, making their lives more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free” (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz). With faster publications and more opportunity to capitalize off of YA literature there has been a mass production of books with various types of female protagonists. These female-warrior types of protagonists have especially become super popular because of the way they defy expectations and manage to survive by their own means. While that is an admirable representation of the power of women, these types of female protagonist also bring with them another assumption: that feminine women are weak. These female characters glorify their strength and lack of empathy as tools of survival to assert themselves in positions of leadership and dominance while concurrently alienating women who may not have similar characteristics. Similar to *Wife of Bath*, these YA female protagonists give themselves agency in the form of being able to dictate their choices however, their actions in the book suggest otherwise. In the next section I will demonstrate how female YA protagonists set themselves up for failure by drawing on popular culture’s beloved females.

### 2.1. Male-Centric YA Romance

Amy Pattee argues in *Reading the Adolescent Romance* that “YA romance novel is an inherently conservative genre, affirming, as it does, heteronormative values.” She further identifies conservative characteristics as being, predominately taking place in a

domestic or commercial setting with the main plot of the book revolving around attaining, maintaining, and keeping the love interest. Furthermore, these books perpetuate the idea of achieving “true love” being the highest validation of their struggles and that “[true love] either romantic or familial, is a reward worth work and sacrifice” (Pattee). What is problematic in these books is the portrayal of the character who chooses to sacrifice (the woman) and the desired object (the male). Traditional gender roles define the female as subservient to the patriarch of the family. She must be the one to absolve her identity for her male partners and in doing so she is ascribing her existence to her male partner’s. Take Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga for example. Bella, the shy and awkward girl falls in love with Edward Cullen, a seemingly isolated and aloof vampire. I would like to point out numerous ways this fan favorite series hurts women and the feminist movement. The *Twilight Saga* follows a gender-typical, old-fashioned romance where Bella Swan meets Edward Cullen, they fall in love, get married against all odds, have a baby, and live happily ever after. Critics (like Rubenstein, Mauk, James, and Hamilton-Honey) like to believe that Bella was a good feminist character because she was able to make many young women feel connected to her. She was average looking, had barely any skills, wanted male attention, and was drifting between her parents’ care. Many girls looked up to her because they saw themselves as average and if someone as boring as Bella could get a really attractive vampire boyfriend, why couldn’t they? Bella has always been stubborn about what she wants, even though others might think it’s too “girly” or typical of a girl, but she never sways. She wants a cute boyfriend that she can have sex with and forever be with the man she loves. Attacking this ideology is like attacking feminine women for prioritizing what is normally and stereotypically a

feminine fantasy. If we were trying to reach equality, it needs to start with women not attacking each other.

Nonetheless Bella swan is a stagnant character who constantly needs to be saved by the male vampire (or in some cases werewolf) leads. She doesn't make any decisions for herself and is consistently trying to turn into a vampire so that she can be with Edward forever, knowing that she will have to cut all ties with her friends and family. The main love interests, Jacob Black and Edward Cullen, have taken a possessive control over Bella's humanity- because obviously she has no choice in it. But Bella doesn't want to choose; she would rather relinquish her identity into Edward because she was "unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him" (Meyers). Meyers plays into gender roles pretty quickly into the start of the first book, when the two protagonists declare their love for each other. This was their confession scene:

"And so the lion fell in love with the lamb,' he murmured. I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the world. 'What a stupid lamb,' I sighed. 'What a sick, masochistic lion.'" (Meyers, 112).

We don't really need to think hard to know that Bella is the lamb and Edward is the lion. What is problematic is how Bella, a woman, is very much like the lamb that would have been a victim to a lion's appetite. Her parallel to the lamb just fortifies how weak and fragile Bella is because she is a "human" woman versus Edward's lion description, aligning men as being predatory and aggressive. Bella's relationship with both Edward and Jacob was so abusive, it's scary to think how normalized that behavior is in the saga. For example, in *New Moon*, sequel to *Twilight*, Edward leaves Bella and she begins to experience grief and loss. Meyer's shifts the focus onto the emotional growth of Bella

and does a really fantastic job of portraying a teen who is coping over the loss of her first boyfriend. However, nearing the middle of the book Bella is thrown into the world of werewolves when her new best friend, Jacob Black, turns into one. And then, to reciprocate from the loss of Edward, Bella instead embraces Jacob for the companionship he brings her. Meyers has Bella move on from Edward by directly placing her into the hands of Jacob, the new love interest. His presence lifts Bella out of her depression and into another toxic and abusive relationship.

“Even more, I had never meant to love him... But I needed Jacob now, needed him like a drug. I’d used him like a crutch for too long and was in deeper than I’d planned to go with anyone again,” (*New Moon*, 192).

There is no real self-reflection or any healthy coping mechanisms that Bella could utilize to her back on her feet. She is constantly surrounded by so many men in these books. Majority of the werewolves are men, the vampires are mostly men, her guardian, Charlie, is mostly absent when all of this is happening. This series completely fuels the patriarchal agenda. The only reason, and I am making an assumption here, many young girls like and relate to Bella is because in some form or fashion they believe themselves to be just as plain and boring as her. Their self-image of themselves is average, so when they see Bella landing the romantic interest of “two hotties” Edward and Jacob, they believe they too can achieve that. Not only are attractive romantic partners a possibility, but Bella actively engages in expressing her sexual desire for Edward- although the purity culture that surrounds the sexual desire weakens this progressive sentiment.

Tanya Gold, a journalist for *The Guardian* wrote a scathing review of *Twilight* calling it a “disempowerment fantasies,” and “masquerading as fairy-tales, normalizing

the abuse in the name of risqué romance.” She goes on to say that there is anti-feminism present in way too many young adult novels, we just don’t realize it because it’s presented to young women and idealized romantic desirability coupled with assessing self-worth through reciprocation of romantic interest. Studying the representation of women in literature can help identify the gaps between a fair society and one that still upholds patriarchal conservatism. Literature across history provides a substantive measure to evaluate the roles of women as time progresses. The same should be applied to young adult literature, because the outbreak of this market and its mass female consumers may be easily influenced by gender conservatism. Gender Equality Pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft argued “that the descriptions of women as weak and foolish in literature corrupted the minds of young girls,” (Arende). Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan further criticized literature for its role in perpetuating female subordination in the 1950s (Hubler 463). While young adult literature may not be as affluent as adult fiction or classics, however, to disregard the messages sublimely thrown at young audiences may dissuade many young readers away from the progression of feminist critique. Feminist Criticism, as defined by scholar Lois Tyson, concerns “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women.” Feminist criticism looks at the ways in which our culture embodies patriarchal ideals and aims to “expose misogyny in writings about women which can take explicit and implicit forms,” (Tyson). Third-wave feminism constitutes:

“resisting the perceived essentialist (over generalized, over simplified) ideologies and a white, heterosexual, middle class focus of second wave

feminism, third wave feminism borrows from post-structural and contemporary gender and race theories to expand on marginalized populations' experiences. Writers like Alice Walker work to "...reconcile it [feminism] with the concerns of the black community...[and] the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialog and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform" (Tyson).

Supporting this statement is Dorin Schumacher's assertion that,

"in literature, the mechanisms of the cultural mindset that are responsible for gender inequality. The belief "that males and females exhibit group characteristics" and the habit of making "dichotomous, value-associated assumptions about the two sexes" that are unfair and inaccurate."

The assumption that both Tyson and Schumacher expose is that in literature, and in some degrees social studies, most times the male is depicted as intelligent and reasonable, while the woman is emotional and irrational and this is particularly detrimental because "the oppression of women is integrally linked to the traditional tie between masculinity and femininity," (James). This dichotomy is evident in most romance-plotted fiction where passivity is particularly dominant, thus it becomes natural to shift the focus from self-reflection to romantic pursuit. Theorist Judith Kegan Gardiner states that "in novels that have a female heroine, the focus of interest is not her, but her male partner." Take for example protagonists that are pulled into love-triangles. The biggest debate around *Twilight* or *Hunger Games* revolved around whether or not these girls were matched with the best possible male partner. For Bella is was the partisan of

Team Jacob vs Team Edward, or for Katniss, it was Team Gale or Team Peeta. In these instances the authors are setting up their protagonists with a promise to deliver action and female empowerment, but instead develop conservative gendering where she becomes a commodity that needs to be won over. One may think, well don't these women choose which one of these men she wants? The short answer is yes, but the correct answer is no. The triangle had been pre-mediated, and the outcome determined by unfulfilled fantasy of the writer and readers. If Katniss actually got to choose, I am one hundred percent sure she would not have chosen either men. The female protagonist choice is limited to two (often horrible) choices.

The lack of real agency and this fake sense of individuality is what constitutes to the "Strong Female Character" paradox. This is the idea that the main female lead in a YA book series is created to be independent, self-reliant, and at the forefront of action. She is promoted as this figure who will rebel against all norms and traditions while simultaneously being talented in a particular skill that is essential for the story to move on. Basically, this character is a badass with a sense of moral justice and righteousness. These characteristics aren't bad, in fact they should be developed more thoroughly in all forms of Literature concerning women. Nevertheless, the problem isn't that the strong female character has these values, it's how these values are brought up in the initial premise of the story, but never fully developed, subverted by other male characters, or the female character just develops backwardly. Common criticisms many scholars (Anselmo-Sequeira, Rubinstein-Avila, Hubler, Lemaster) discuss about female protagonists is how these girls exemplify dominant masculine traits, such as strength, bravery, aloofness, ambition and are often praised because those are typical characteristics of the "hero." Whereas on the

flip side these protagonists are also mauled for being un-likable, too self-interested, a poor representation of a female character. This criticism falls under two categories. The first (praised for having typical “hero” traits) reveals that the audience likes this character because she is similar to her male equivalent hero. Her masculine traits are valued to the point that the character herself thinks she is rejecting traditional gender roles and gets mad at other, more feminine women, for not doing the same. By alienating other women for not being *man-enough* the protagonist just goes on to reinforce that masculinity is superior to femininity. “The idea that rejecting femininity makes you strong creates an antithesis in which other, more feminine, characters are presented as weak,” (Lemaster). The second (protagonist being mauled for being un-likable, too self-interested) reveals how prevalent sexism is when it comes to critiquing female characters. If this aloof, ambitious character was a male, would the reaction be the same? What constitutes as a “good female character?” Is it always being nice? Self-sacrificial?

But this rebellion against the patriarchy doesn’t go as planned. Inadvertently these strong female characters don’t make key decisions at significant moments and are over-shadowed by their male counterpart. Even at the climax of the novel, these heroines take a step back and let the male protagonist take the lead, (Gardner). We can see this pattern in almost every YA book series like *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* where Annabeth, daughter of Athena (who is a patron Goddess of battle strategy) arguably contorts the best battle plans and is quick witted, but the credit of saving Olympus is given to Percy! He is the one who becomes the legend, not Annabeth, the only competent character in the entire series. The *Harry Potter* series is notorious for consistently undermining Hermione Granger when she is literally the reason Harry survives each and every single year. In this book series, it is Hermione saving the

boys instead of the other way, but still it's Harry who gets the credit for defeating Voldemort. It's Harry who "saves the wizarding world" even though he is a very mediocre and incompetent character.

Hermione Granger is another promising character that immediately caught the attention of many young women. She is often regarded as pop culture's "feminist icon" (Cordova) because of how she is greatly self-sufficient in magical use, is extremely intelligent, ambitious, and brave. Magic, in the Harry Potter universe, is greatly an equalizing force, so Hermione's use of magic (outside of theoretically knowing it) has been crucial to the advancement of the plot. Many critics, like Kathryn McDaniel and Michelle Yeo point out that perhaps understanding Hermione's feminism might be difficult because she is a character told in the perspective of the male protagonist creating a "superficial nod to gender equality that only masks a deeply entrenched patriarchal structure in the collective consciousness" (Yeo). Harry's interaction with Hermione and his perception of her behavior significantly alters the way her character is perceived by the reader. Hermione's agency is at the mercy of Harry's dictation of her actions. She is appreciated for her ability to show courage in a threatening situation; however, she is also depicted vindictively when interacting with more feminine characters in the book series. Let's take Fleur Delacour for example. Fleur makes her debut in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as the only female tri-wizard champion. She is described as "a stunningly beautiful witch, with wavy silver-blonde hair that seems to float behind her as she walks" (GoF, 167). Fleur was part Veela, which was a magical genealogy trait that automatically made her more attractive to others. She unapologetically used her looks and appeal to her advantage to get what she wanted and Hermione did not like that one bit. She often responded to Fleur's presence as "obnoxious" or "disturbing the only peace and quiet

she had in the library.” She confides in Ron and Harry that she doesn’t know why she doesn’t like Fleur and chalks it up to Fleur “being too pretty to have a brain” (GF, 397). Hermione projects her jealousy and insecurity on Fleur as a way to cope with Ron’s (her eventual love interest) attraction towards the Veela-Witch completely ignoring the fact that she is a contestant for one of the deadliest school tournaments and that in order to compete in this tournament a witch or wizard needs to be extremely competent in wielding magic. Because Fleur is not bookish, or average looking, she is disliked by almost every female character in the series (including Ginny and Molly Weasley). She is thought of as being shallow, obsessed with looks, and “too fragile to even hold a wand” (GoF, 522). This depiction of Fleur by Hermione and other strong female characters completely makes these heroines hypocrites because they go from claiming to support each other, to ostracizing those females that don’t fit the bookish or tomboyish persona. Outside of Ron and Harry, Hermione doesn’t actually “save” or rescue another female character in the entirety of the series. Which makes me wonder how Hermione is revered as a “feminist icon” when her character does nothing but cater to the wellbeing of Harry or Ron making her a superficial feminist while sparsely contributing to her own development. Furthermore, Hermione Granger, in book the first book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* Hermione says:

*‘Harry – you’re a great wizard, you know.’*

*‘I’m not as good as you,’ said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.*

*‘Me!’ said Hermione. ‘Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be careful!’*

In essentially one sentence Hermione completely downplays her importance in the book. She positions herself inferior to Harry because her best qualities: being clever and intelligent is

not as admirable as Harry's bravery. But Harry wouldn't have survived had she not been academically superior to both Ron and Harry in every way. Her analytical thinking and logical application of magic is why the three of them were alive. So, it's pretty retrograde to see Hermione place herself in an inferior position to Harry while millions of female readers constantly praise her.

### 3. The Parallel

If I were to divide the main concepts of false feminism between Wife of Bath and YA Heroines there would be three main categories of intersection: agency, liberation, and influence of authorship. These categories allow for a feminist reading of these women; however, their status as feminist characters depend highly on the needs and expectations of modern feminist. Feminism in 2021 looks a lot different than feminism in 1970 or 1860 or 1300s and this modern evolution of female perception needs to be accounted for in feminist literary discussions. The Wife of Bath could have been pro-feminist in 1800s however she no longer fits the model of a modern feminist. Similarly, Bella Swan, Hermione Granger, or Katniss Everdeen could have been observed as strong feminist, however, they fall short of expectations of current feminist discourse. The main thing that prevents Wife of Bath and YA female protagonists from achieving true feminist status is that their actions don't match what they say they believe in. So, them claiming agency but submitting to the needs of other male characters while punishing women for not being "male-like" undermines the whole motivation of being a pro-feminist woman. Let us individually consider these categories and clarify where the discrepancy between strong female characters and anti-feminist rhetoric occurs.

#### 3.1. Agency

Megan McDonough defines agency as "the choices one makes and the subsequent actions they take." To her concept of agency Bradford *et al.* add "to be able to act-to have *agency*- means being able to answer for our actions, to be responsible." To be able to claim and maintain agency is paramount in negotiating amounts of autonomy in relation to others. It's a quasi-power move determined by the capacity for reflection on one's

motivational structure and to change from that act of retrospection. Makenzie and Stoljar make evident that understanding agency and autonomy “is necessary from a feminist perspective in order to understand oppression, subjugation, and limitations” and to be successfully be able to reconfigure autonomy. Since autonomy is seen as a primarily masculine concept, it needs to be further developed to include feminist perspective. McNay observes that a “new or revised version of agency has been the concern of feminism for years because it helps uncover the marginalized experiences of women.” Fundamentally understanding the feminist version of agency requires one to think critically about the motives, actions, and accountability of women in literary texts and how they are able to establish their independent power while looking for opportunities to further their autonomy.

The Wife of Bath has articulated her agency through experiential authority. Her version of agency is superficial in the sense that it is wishful and does not actually exist. It's discursive discourse that does not denote her free will, nor does it provide her with the ability to choose for herself. Alisoun firmly believes that she has her husbands under her control, but she has only created the ideal version of a husband she would like to surrender to. Likewise female protagonists in YA literature attempt to subvert societal norms and resist dominant customs by performing an identity that is compatible with the Hero's journey. The unique female “voice” that empowers the protagonist is lost amidst the loud clashes of male voices. Protagonists (and to some extent Wife of Bath) like Bella, Hermione, Ferye, and Katniss all have a distinct voice, but by the end of their respective tales their identity is tied to another male character. The accumulation of all of their experiences, fights, and moral integrity is summed up with a whimsical patch of

“and they all lived happily ever after.” This is not feminism. These characters are a projection of wishful thinking that come off as feminist because of the premise in which they are written. However, outside of that premise these protagonist consistently fail to maintain their agency in important plot areas or are domesticated for the purpose of ending the story with a heteronormative romance.

### 3.2. Liberation or Androcentrism?

The second category of intersectionality between Wife of Bath and YA female protagonists stems from liberation in the sense that these women believe they have equal freedom in decision making spaces. Karlyn Campbell calls women’s liberation a “rhetorical movement” as a “distinctive genre because it evinces unique rhetorical qualities that are a fashion of substantive and stylistic features.” What Campbell asserts is that when reading females in literature it is important to understand their liberated areas in terms of their use of rhetoric in their perceived reality. It’s important to understand how women use language to adhere to their current cultural values without explicitly saying that they are doing so. The example Campbell uses is the phrase “I pronounce you *man* and wife” to show how involuntarily the slippage of patriarchal rhetoric language is. She argues that women are not liberated as so long as they *think* in terms of patriarchal language. We, as a community of women, are entangled in rhetoric that forces us to normalize language rooted in division of gender. This entanglement is so deep, that today it is almost unrecognizable. It takes critical thought and complex discussions to flush out male-centric language. In order to truly become members of the liberated rhetoric women must violate the norms governing “sex appropriate behavior” (Campbell) which includes having awareness of phrases like “*man* and wife,” “*bridegroom*,” “wearing the *pants* in

the relationship,” “*Man up,*” “grow a *pair,*” “don’t be a pu\*\*y” and dispelling oneself from it. Re-using sexist language just reinforces gendered language in society and makes it hard to break out of thinking male-centric language.

What is absent in popular feminist discourse is a set of distinctive shared values amongst women, something that unifies us, and I think that is very much the case for *Wife of Bath* and many YA female characters. The *Wife* and characters like Bella Swan, Hermione Granger, and Katniss Everdeen are representations of values that women should or should conform to in their respective societies. These women attempt to mirror the words and actions of their real counterparts. And assessing their language tells us a lot about the condition of feminism of their time. Albeit feminism wasn’t a concept in the Middle Ages, but the argument for *Wife of Bath* being a proto feminist can still be dispelled using this notion.

The *Wife of Bath* consistently uses sexist language- specifically referring to her genitalia- in an attempt to balance power. But she does so in monetary terms. Take this quote as an example:

*“For if I wolde selle my bele chose  
I koude walke as fressh as is a rose;  
But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth”  
-(Ln 454-456)*

Here the *Wife of Bath* is clearly saying that her “*bele chose*” comes at a price and that her sexual experience can transform her into a fresh rose ready for the consumption of her delighting companions. But notice that this proposition of sex does not come from her desire to be engaging in sexual activity, but rather one of business. She is selling

herself as an object with a promise to deliver satisfaction which actually reinforces her character as an object. Not a woman with sexual desire, but an object that is sold to the highest bidder. After all, she uses sex to get married to men with money. She is not liberated in making advances of sex because it does not come from genuine pleasure, just the need to have back up money. The Wife here is not thinking in terms of women's sexual needs or desire, but regurgitating male ideas that women are lesser than men and should be viewed as a commodity- something to capitalize on. If the Wife did believe that women had the right to be engaged in sexuality, she would not have said

*“Crist was a mayde and shapen as a man,  
And many a seint, sith that the world bigan;  
Yet lyved they evere in parfit chastitee.  
I nyl envye no virginitee.  
Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,  
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed”*

(Ln 139-145)

The Wife is making clear distinction between *virgin* women being too pure and implying that they don't have desires for men to use just yet. Wives are experienced, they know how enjoyable sex is, but unless a woman does not experience sex at the hands of men, they should not be made participatory. Clearly Alisoun of Bath is thinking in terms of male expectations of women and the need to fulfill their desires. Because the Wife's purpose is not sexual liberation, it's to sustain her relationship with her husbands by weaponizing her sexual prowess.

Young adult protagonists also think in terms of androcentric culture. Often books like *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Mass), *The Cruel Prince* (Black), and *The Red Queen* (Aveyard) have strong female characters battling some sort of mystical enemy with a male companion that ultimately saves the day. What's interesting about these protagonists is that they are placed in a situation where they need to take on responsibilities that would traditionally have been male. For example, in *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black, the main protagonist Jude wants to be a Knight, which is mainly ascribed to males in this fictional setting. But the King was so impressed with her swordsmanship that he hires her to be his mischievous son's guard. Of course this is just euphemism to then transform Jude's character from a badass female warrior to a glorified babysitter that needs to mother this unruly prince (whom she eventually falls in love with and marries \*gasp\*). The point of view of the book is told by Jude whose introspection reveals that her character refocuses her priority of becoming an inducted knight to that of a mothering savior. And her change in direction happens almost naturally, and her presentation of wanting to be a knight was almost a source of resistance for the reader. Because her desire to want to be a knight is resisted by all male characters in the book, thus making the reader feel like she is incompetent at being recognized. Jude's relationship with the male protagonist is awful. He is a mean and childish protagonist who needs Jude to act a certain way around him to get his approval. In order to trick him into submitting to her power, Jude seduces Caden (the male protagonist) in order to subvert his position at the royal court and to gain an upper hand in courtly politics . . . (sound familiar?) Her seduction of Caden was also not a response to her sexual desire- although at the end it does end with a homage to domestic happiness- it was for a status

gain. Once again, sexuality and the sensuous woman will always be depicted as morally unjustified by her actions, selling her body for some type of power gain, or attempting to gain power differently than feminine women.

### 3.3. Author Influence

Carlin Borsheim-Black, an English Teacher in Michigan, conducting this interesting study called, “Reading Pop Culture and Adult Young Literature through the Youth Lens.” In this study she assigns various Young Adult books to her class and uses their assessment of the literature to critique dominant images of adolescents in young adult literature and popular culture, (Borsheim-Black). What struck me so profoundly was how she was able to change the entire perception of students by asking them to assess the books first, through the eyes of the characters, and second, through the eyes of the author. The study revolves around the book *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. The novel’s main protagonists are Clay Jensen, a shy and meek boy, and Hannah Baker, a girl who commits suicide. However, before she dies, Hannah records 13 tapes and sends them to 13 people who contributed to her decision to kill herself.

Thematically, this book is popularized because of its stance against bullying and to raise awareness to teen suicide rates. Borsheim-Black pushes back and claims that there is more to this book than an anti-bullying message. She explains how the majority of the underlying messages are related to sex and how the characters react engagement of sexual activity. In her study she says, “For example, a focus on characterization highlights the portrayal of male characters in the book as sexual predators: Hannah is objectified or victimized in almost every encounter with an adolescent male.” These sexual encounters reinforce a double standard related to sexuality by illustrating males to

be “controlled by their raging hormones” and females must “protect themselves from the dangers of sex and boys,” (Borsheim-Black).

But what if we switched it up showcase a little? Instead of analyzing the book from the point of view of an adolescent, we scrutinize it in the point of view of the author. How does the message of the Asher’s book, *Thirteen Reason’s Why*, change if we look at the author instead of the characters? Borsheim-Black applies Roberta Trites’s ideas (from her book *Power and Representation in Adolescent Literature*) to deconstruct this idea of “slippage” which helps explain the ways in which authors self-insert themselves in their books, or how actions of characters are less informed by their demographics and more by what the author believes that demography will behave like. When analyzing the book in those terms, “we are reminded that it is not Hannah or Clay telling the story; it is Jay Asher, a 38-year-old male author,” (Borsheim-Black). This shift in focus then allowed her students to come to the conclusion that this book was less of a representation of adolescent perception of sex or bullying, but more about what Jay Asher thought adolescent readers should learn from the book.

I think that critically analyzing popular text through the lens of the author is very important because sometimes it’s not the characters and readers having a shared experience, but the author and the reader. In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer is able to manipulate his voice- though the Wife of Bath- to effectively create the voice of a Woman reiterating male-grounded stereotypes of females at the time. The Wife of Bath’s tale and prologue isn’t the Wife actually speaking. Many forget that it is Chaucer *the pilgrim* re-sharing the stories he “heard” via the narration of Chaucer *the author*. Geoffrey Chaucer is in complete control of everything the Wife of Bath says. He is

giving the reader a false sense of security by fabricating Alisoun of Bath as the author of her own prologue and tale. He knowingly gives a voice to the Wife of Bath as this female author, but in reality, he is a ventriloquist.

Keep in mind that Geoffrey Chaucer is the only Male author I have heavily focused on (with Jay Asher making a casual appearance), but nonetheless all of the other books I have discussed in this essay are books written by female authors. Female authors are the ones writing their female characters in a misogynistic way. How is it that Geoffrey Chaucer, a male author, is intentionally writing his character with internalized misogyny but female authors don't recognize their own internal misogyny represented in their characters that are supposed to be fighting it? This reflects very heavily on our current understanding of gender roles and power inequality amongst the two sexes. Female writers echo the sentiments of Wife of Bath as writers with unintentional internal misogyny and breathe them into their characters. With the rise of third wave feminism and the shifting of a cultural tide to be more inclusive of all genders, there is still more work to do. Scholars need to expand their literary criticism into pop culture books because this is a new generation of readers being influenced by these heroines. There needs to be a more authentic discussion around these YA female protagonists, because the majority of what these women represent are wishful thinking of a society that believes it has progressed. Finding so many similarities between Chaucer's Wife of Bath and our beloved modern YA female protagonist should serve as a cautionary revelation of how we have yet to conquer false feminists from literature.

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