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Critical Intervention Report

Introductory Paragraph

In Holly A. Crocker's *W(h)ither Feminism? Gender, Subjectivity, and Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'* and Emma Lipton's *Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the Wife of Bath's Tale* essays, it is essential to discuss how each tale discusses gender stereotypes and how to garner feminist support effectively. Crocker's essay examines the *Knight's Tale*, which successfully objectifies women and reinforces gender stereotypes. In contrast, Lipton's essay examines the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which disregards and reimagines a world that lets women collectively bargain for their sovereignty. In both tales, Chaucer uses the societal power of the knight, someone held in high esteem, to go after women - usually seen as the property of men. In the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye's autonomy is nonexistent. She has no power, and though the tale would not exist without her, her wishes are ignored. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is entirely different. The knight has raped a woman, and rather than let the knight be beheaded, the queen and her court ask to give their punishment to the knight, which the king agrees to. His punishment is to understand what women most desire, something all women would love for men to try and understand.

Description of Emma Lipton's *Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the Wife of Bath's Tale*

Lipton's essay on *The Wife of Bath's Tale* argues that through collective bargaining, women can advocate for themselves within the patriarchal system that has been set forth. Though

women may not have tangible items to bargain with, they have each other and their promises - something that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is dependent upon.

Summary of Emma Lipton's *Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the Wife of Bath's Tale*

To summarize Lipton's essay on *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, it is necessary to note the societal changes required to promote change for women in patriarchal government systems. It is also important to note that the end of the tale is supposed to be unnerving, to make the reader question whether or not the knight is happy with his new bride and whether or not he deserves a beautiful and faithful wife after he has raped a woman.

The law is reliant on patriarchal systems that are intended to keep women down and keep men in power. Lipton argues that "... the tale does not promote a redistributive payback model of justice, but embraces a broad vision of law associated with female agency, that promotes social change through reeducation" (336). Rather than try and advocate for a new system that is beneficial rather than detrimental to women, these women in the knight's tale use the power already there and twist it to help themselves. The tale itself does not have a solution for rape. It instead explores how women should be at the center of activism so that victims get representation.

At the beginning of the tale, Lipton notes that women (faeries) used to run the world, and it has been taken over by men (friars). This speaks to the patriarchal religious values that have taken over and pushed women's autonomy to the side. In the tale, rape is a crime against women, and the punishment for a crime against women is murder. When the king and the men of the court are first considering possible punishments for the knight, it is agreed that because the knight has violently violated a woman sexually, it is only fair that the knight himself should be violently beheaded. This idea of retribution is distinctly male. This is not justice for the women

of the court. They instead ask for mercy upon the knight and that they choose his fate instead. Their collective bargaining is taken seriously, and the queen and her court effectively advocate for their female agency and get to select a punishment for the knight's crime against women.

The court offers the knight his life; in return, he must discover what women desire most in the world. Lipton argues that this is women asking for individual reform rather than corporal punishment. The only way to truly get justice is to have someone re-educated and rehabilitated for their past crimes.

It is also important to note that the only man in the second court scene is the knight, who historically would have all of the power in the world. Now, he must either face death or be obligated to the women to whom he has sworn his word. Rather than a woman being subjected to the desires of men, Chaucer flips this on its head. The knight must be subjected to what he has unknowingly agreed to - marriage to an older ugly woman (the worst crime for someone of his status). Though he eventually agrees to the older woman's terms and uses the knowledge she has given him to give her the agency to choose for herself; it is unclear whether or not he made this choice of his own will.

The woman, in turn, provides the knight with what he wants - a young and beautiful wife who is also faithful. But even this is conditional. Lipton explains, "Even as she pledges to be 'good,' she allows, by a conditional phrase, for the possibility that her pledge will not produce the future she intends, indicating that contracts are not infallibly performative" (348). Just like the contracts made before, they depend entirely on the knight's obedience to his wife, effectively putting the power in her hands. Though many are uneasy at this revelation, it speaks to the lack of power women have on the individual level and how collective bargaining is needed for women to advocate for progress within society.

Assessment of Emma Lipton's *Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the Wife of Bath's Tale*

Lipton's argument is beautifully structured and incredibly argued. She acknowledges the fact that though women in this society are still dependent on the patriarchal systems that have been created, they can reject and restructure these systems to work towards the common goal. Chaucer equates the knight's goal to the same goal as the reader; to determine what exactly women most desire. This is done through the patriarchal court system, which has historically benefited and been structured for men. While the queen and women of the court are allowed to take charge of the knight's sentencing, the queen restructures how the court operates. Lipton states, "Under the queen's watch, the law immediately shifts from being a means of retribution to becoming an institutionalized model for systemic social change" (340). Though the power is not their own, these women have collectively bargained for a punishment that they feel is more beneficial for women as a whole. The King is no longer a symbol of patriarchal power in this court, and the queen has connected herself with the other women of the court rather than asserting her social status over them. Chaucer has effectively given women what they most desire; their own sovereignty and freedom away from men.

Description of Holly A. Crocker's *W(h)ither Feminism? Gender, Subjectivity, and Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'*

Holly A. Crocker claims that the *Knight's Tale* takes a different approach. Rather than making women the subjects of our tale, Chaucer has completely given in to gender stereotypes and upholds societal values. Emelye shows that women in these societies cannot advocate for themselves and are subject to the will of the men around them. The question now is whether or not this harmfully impacts women like Emelye or if Chaucer was cleverly trying to question the patriarchal status quo.

Summary of Holly A. Crocker's *W(h)ither Feminism? Gender, Subjectivity, and Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'*

Crocker argues that although *The Knight's Tale* focuses primarily on the men and their fight against each other, the objectification of Emelye is merely to hold up already-held societal beliefs regarding gender roles. Crocker proves this by saying, "The Knight, too, shows how subjectivity results from disenchantment, or from deploying masculinity's contingent constructedness to assert its authenticity, steadiness, and permanence" (355). While some feminist scholars may believe that this makes the female object, in this case, Emelye, only the result of her society around her, others believe that the crafting of the men in this tale is much more meaningful.

It proves that in a patriarchal society, men are subject to holding up toxic masculinity and the standards set for themselves. Masculinity is fragile, so femininity must be able to withstand constant negative stereotypes that aim to belittle the female sex entirely. While womanhood is communal; and something that other women can cling to for solace, masculinity is held to individual standards. The knight and Theseus are seen as good models for masculinity, but they cannot stand for the entire male sex themselves. It is down to each individual man to prove his masculinity valid and strong enough for it to uphold the patriarchy and keep women like Emelye in her place.

This brings us to talk about what Crocker describes as "Feminism without Gender." Suppose we were to analyze the *Knight's Tale* without understanding the patriarchal lens it was written with. In that case, it is easy to see Emelye as a simple woman written to uphold acceptable standards for women. Rather, Crocker insists that Emelye is distinctly different from a socially acceptable woman. Crocker writes, "Indeed, because she performs for no audience,

Chaucer's characterization produces dissonance in the traditional romance production of woman as Other. She is mysterious, of course, but Emelye's alterity is not produced to elicit masculine attention" (357).

Emelye is not written for the male gaze. Instead, she's something else entirely. Though she ultimately must take her "place" at the end of the tale and become a wife, she still obtains a level of autonomy. She only does things for herself. She does not characterize herself for a male audience, which is precisely what makes her so intriguing. Like the Amazons Theseus has conquered, she is taking a silent stand to maintain her own life. Though she has no power herself, there is still power in standing firm despite the lack of autonomy.

Furthermore, Crocker goes on to explain that Emelye's vulnerability is valuable in her characterization. Though she is perceived as docile and soft, easily malleable for a masculine reader, Chaucer links her vulnerability and mercy with the likes of Theseus. Crocker explains, "If we puzzle over why Chaucer might have assigned Theseus an emotion associated with women, using a line elsewhere reserved for a woman, perhaps the answer is that he is far more similar to these women than he wants to admit" (359). Patriarchy relies on individual men being able to keep women down, and whether intentionally or not, Chaucer has connected emotions with Emelye, a maiden with no autonomy, with Theseus, a ruler who embodies what a man "should be."

Assessment of Holly A. Crocker's *W(h)ither Feminism? Gender, Subjectivity, and Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'*

Holly A. Crocker brings an interesting question into play. Did Chaucer intentionally create this tale to break down society's expectations of women and men, or did he create the tale simply to draw attention to the question? Crocker meaningfully dissects the necessary

components of patriarchy and provides excellent explanations of how patriarchy relies on docile women. It is also worth noting the contrast between women being held responsible as a collective and men being held accountable individually. Comparing men like the knight and Theseus to prisoners of war, Palamon and Arcite are to juxtapose just how fragile the patriarchy is and how reliant it is upon individual men upholding masculinity.

Conclusion on Emma Lipton's *Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the Wife of Bath's Tale* and Holly A. Crocker's *W(h)ither Feminism? Gender, Subjectivity, and Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'*

Throughout both Lipton and Crocker's essays, they discuss ideas revolving around the subjectivity vs. objectivity of female characters. They also discuss how the knight's societal standing can affect how women can garner support for their autonomy. I believe that in both Lipton and Crocker's essays, they effectively argue their individual points. While it is impossible to know Chaucer's intentions behind both the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Knight's Tale*, it is safe to assume that he was well aware of the framing of the women in each story. Juxtaposing a docile woman like Emelye, subject to the will of the men around her, with a group of women forcing the knight into a marriage he believes is below him is vital in gauging how audiences feel regarding women in power. While neither Emelye nor the group of women has any real power for themselves, I believe that women must use collective bargaining to their advantage to be able to wield justice for themselves in this patriarchal society.

Citations

Crocker, Holly A. "W(h)ither Feminism? Gender, Subjectivity, and Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." *The*

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