Wicked Wives and Crossdressers:

*A close reading of Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath’s prologue and tale and Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, Or What You Will*

From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, we have seen the emergence of many kinds of love, and with that love, there is always a price. Whether it be one’s sovereignty over another or one’s voice, it is the nature of love to be given so long as something else is taken away. Marriage rarely ever had to do with romantic love in the Middle Ages, and sex was only meant for procreation and not pleasure. Such were the ideals of the church, and to go against the church was a sin. In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, his most complex and fully realized character is The Wife of Bath, and she in her prologue reveals the difficulties that have come with love and marriage in her life. In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* we are provoked to think about stereotypical gender roles when it comes to love, and are faced with the ridiculous argument of which sex possesses a greater capacity for love. Although the two works are written in different forms and genres, their depictions of women who love helps us think about the social and historical context of these portrayals. In the history of English literature women’s roles have seemingly remained consistent, and even when it comes to love they are looked down upon if they desire sovereignty, or once they have been spoken for, by a man, they lose their voices. The nature of love in these two texts is that the women, like The Wife of Bath, and Viola (disguised as Cesario) find strength in loving, but are criticized for it. In my paper, I will argue that a woman’s love cannot be fully accepted unless she gives up something in return, and if she has power over her lover, then that love will be taken from her.

In her prologue, Alisoun, The Wife of Bath, reveals to the pilgrims that she has had five husbands and is searching for a sixth. She desires a young husband, one that she can leave her money to because she is an older woman and will inevitably die. Her character challenges the church's ideas of how women should behave and in her characterization, it seems that Chaucer defends her. It can be argued that Chaucer was a proto-feminist, and this can be seen through Alisoun’s strength. Her fifth husband Jankin, a clerk, was very abusive toward her, and would even read to her every night from his Book of Wicked Wives, a common text in the middle ages that represented the anti-feminist stance of the church. This textual “authority” reinforces stereotypes of “bad” female behavior (lecture notes) and stands in the way of what Alisoun wants from Jankin. “To reden on this cursed book al night, /Al sodeintly three leves have I plight/ Out of his book right as he redde, and eke I with my fist so took him on the cheeke (Chaucer, 795-798).” She loves him, but he becomes too cruel, and eventually she finds the strength to stop his reading, ripping out three pages from his book, and even punches him in the face. Alisoun challenges the medieval notion of male sovereignty by demanding it from Jankin rather forcefully, and eventually he gives her that which every woman wants. Once she is given sovereignty, they remain happy for a short while until Jankin dies like the rest of her husbands before. This is noteworthy because it seems that once a man has given up his power to a woman he will die, and by having power over him, Alisoun loses her love. All love comes with a price, and sometimes that price is death.

In the Wife of Bath’s tale, she tells a story of the Arthurian Romance genre, in which a Knight must answer his queen’s question: “What thing it is that wommen most desiren: Be war and keep thy nekke boon from iren (911-912),” to avoid being put to death. The Knight is given one year and one day, a common characteristic of the genre, and sets off on a journey to find the answer. This is significant because the tale reveals Alisoun’s own desire for sovereignty from her husband. The Knight finds an old woman and asks her what all women desire. She responds by telling him that if he were to marry her then she would give him the answer he seeks. He promises to marry her, and she whispers the answer into his ear. He returns to the court and addresses the queen: “My lige lady, generally,” qoud he, “Wommen desire to have sovereinetee/ As wel over hir housbonde as hir love, /And for to been in maistrye him above (1043-1046).” With this response, he is spared and marries the old woman just as he promised because true knights are chivalrous. Chivalry is a code of behavior derived from Christian notions of morality. Some characteristics include truthfulness, loyalty, and respect for women. The Knight is courteous and so he fulfills his duty, but he cannot hide his disappointment. His old wife gives him an ultimatum: “To han me foul and old til that I deye/ And be to you a trewe humble wif, /And nevere you displese in al my lif, /Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair, /And take youre aventure of the repair, /That shal be to youre hous by cause of me- (1226-1231).” Basically she is saying he can have her old, ugly, and faithful, or young, beautiful, and unfaithful. To this proposition, the Knight gives his wife the power to decide, and by giving her the power to choose he inevitably gives her sovereignty, which is what all women want. “My lady and my love, and wif so dere, /I putte me in youre wise governaunce: /Cheseth youreself which may be most plesaunce /And honour to you and me also (1236-1239).” He has learned this great lesson, and, therefore, his wife becomes young, beautiful, and faithful to the Knight for the rest of their lives. The Wife of Bath’s tale reflects the idea of the relationship she wants, but it is also what she can never have again for she is too old, and all the men she has ever been married to have died.

In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night,* Viola, the female protagonist who disguises herself as a man named Cesario, falls in love with Duke Orsino. The duke has convinced himself that he is in love with the beautiful Lady Olivia and requests that Cesario speaks for him to relay his feelings. The Duke is obviously not as in love as he lets on. Proof of this can be seen through the syntax of the play. It is known that all characters within the play that truly love someone will speak of that person in rhymed couplets, and the Duke never once speaks of Olivia in this way. He is very fickle, which is a characteristic usually seen in a male poet’s portrayals of women during this time, and he argues that men are far more capable of love than women.

“There is no woman’s sides /Can bide the beating of so strong a passion /As love doth give my heart; no woman’s heart/ So big to hold so much; they lack retention. /Alas their love may be called appetite, /No motion of the liver, but the palate, /That suffer surfeit, cloyment, and revolt, /But mine is all as hungry as the sea, /And can digest as much. Make no compare /Between that love a woman can bear me/ And that I owe Olivia (Shakespeare 2.4.92-102).”

The Duke is very obnoxious, and his defense of his love for Olivia is rather ironic because through his lack of rhymed couplets we can already see that he does not truly love her like he is convinced he does. He also ends up accepting Viola’s love, and doesn’t have a second thought about Olivia, referring to her as his sister-in-law after finding out that she has married Sebastian. The nature of love in this text is flexibility. Orsino thought he loved Olivia but ends up with Viola. Olivia loved Cesario (Viola’s disguise) but easily accepts Sebastian once she finds out that he is Viola’s twin brother, and poor Antonio who loved Sebastian remains alone. Sir Toby, Olivia’s uncle, marries Maria, the maid. It can be argued that this is the most genuine pairing in the play even though they are both “low” characters. Orsino also continues to refer to Viola as Cesario at the end of the play and walks off with her while she is still in male gendered clothing. This supports the idea that love is flexible.

Love is also gained through the loss of something greater. Toward the end of the play when all secrets are revealed and everyone has finally been paired off with the “right” person, we see that Viola has stopped speaking. She has figuratively lost her voice and is being spoken for by Duke Orsino. “So much against the mettle of your sex, /So far beneath your soft and tender breeding, /And since you have called me “master” for so long, /Here is my hand. You shall from this time be / Your master’s mistress (5.1.318-322).” Once Orsino has proposed Viola is no longer heard from. She has been spoken for. Viola wanted to obtain his love, but it came with a price. Her role as a woman is therefore implied to be submissive and silent in the presence of the man that has agreed to make her his wife. In his final lines of the play, Orsino has still not once uttered Viola’s real name and continues to call her Cesario. “Cesario, come- /For so you shall be while you are a man. /But when in other habits you are seen, /Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen (5.1.380-383).” This closing remark confirms Viola’s new role. As a woman, she will be the property of the Duke, and is no longer expected to be strong. It could be argued that her strength came from her voice, her ability to speak freely as a man. Being disguised as a man gave her more strength than a woman was meant to have during this time. Once she was viewed as a woman again, her strength had to be taken from her, and so the fickle Duke Orsino steps up to take it from her. Love in *Twelfth Night* is used to reinforce stereotypical gender roles, and to reinforce heteronormativity. Antonio is left alone, and Viola is silenced and weak like all good wives should be.

These depictions of love are important in the social and historical context of English Literature because it shows how little women’s roles change over time from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance period. Women begin to gain power and have strong voices, but once they are spoken for that all changes and makes it clear that they never had free will or power to begin with. A woman’s love cannot be fully accepted unless she gives up something in return, and if she has power over her lover, then that love will be taken from her. This is relevant because we can still see examples of this today. Most women who show signs of strength are looked down upon, seen as undesirable, and some women still have no voice. These depictions are merely fictional, but it is shocking to realize how relevant they still are in our society.