

Chaucer's Women and the Problem of Perfection

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Throughout his poetic career, Geoffrey Chaucer struggled with the politics of representing women. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, he developed a richly complex, and flawed, female protagonist, but worried that the mere act of depicting her would be seen as doing harm to the sex as a whole. He then used the *Legend of Good Women* to satirise the notion that authors must only tell stories about virtuous female characters, and demonstrated that sanitizing the Classical tradition can only lead to literary failure. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer went on to show the terrifying implications of feminine obedience and sexual purity in figures such as Griselda and Virginia. He also created a vivid counterpoint to them in the Wife of Bath, who strenuously argued against the narrow molds according to which women were judged in medieval society.

The problem of women's representation, Chaucer saw, was linked to a rigid idea of perfection that demanded all women fit one mold. This plenary lecture will show how Chaucer used the Wife of Bath to introduce a more adaptable idea of human goodness and flourishing, one likely influenced by Aristotle and Dante: each person should strive to achieve their own perfection. The current trend of literary remakes and re-imaginings of the Wife of Bath shows how compelling her answer continues to be.