

Same Story, Different Endings

Josh Kim

While it would hardly surprise one that medieval texts were often misogynistic in tone, it may surprise some to learn that pro-feminist writings actually did exist. Though misogyny was present in many pieces of writing, the generally hostile attitude of medieval texts towards women could be used to undermine the “values” of misogyny just as well as they could reinforce negative perceptions of women. Both *Johan Johan* and “Ballad of a Tyrannical husband” make use of misogynist portrayals of women. In “Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband,” the husband’s wife is treated as a gossiping woman of the devil and the work she does in the home is devalued, while in *Johan Johan*, Johan’s wife, Tib, is depicted as a licentious, lying gossip and nag who is not to be trusted. However, the misogynist depictions ultimately fail in both texts and, interestingly enough, make *Johan Johan* deeply misogynistic, while making “The Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband” a feminist text.

John Heywood’s *Johan Johan* paints its sole female character as a controlling, “typical” woman that should be regarded with suspicion and contempt: she is harsh, controlling, and should not be trusted. The misogynist characterization of Tib starts almost immediately in *Johan Johan*, when the eponymous character mentions his wife in the same breath as the devil. Near the beginning of the play, Johan prays, “God the divell take her!” (ll. 3). Mentioning Tib alongside the devil and wishing her to hell immediately creates an association between the two, making Tib seem evil. Johan despises her so much that he fantasizes about beating his wife: “Bete her, quod a? yea, that she shall stinke!/And at every stroke lay her on the grounde²” (ll. 12-13). Johan’s hatred is rooted in his suspicion of Tib’s infidelity. His violent imaginings continue for three pages – he’s upset that his wife may be cheating on him with the priest, Sir Johan, which she is. This can be seen when Tib refers to the priest as her “sweteharte³” (ll. 427). Tib implores Johan to call Sir Johan over for dinner, and he agrees. However, before he leaves, Tib commands her husband to do a number of menial tasks: setting the table (ll. 265), washing a cup (ll. 279), checking a barrel for ale (ll. 287)- things she easily could have done herself. This paints Tib as a fickle, indecisive woman, but also make her seem controlling. In the end, Tib runs off with Sir Johan, reinforcing her depiction as a salacious, untrustworthy, ultimately vile woman.

“Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband” also uses misogynistic generalizations, this time to make the husband’s wife look like a lazy gossip who fails to appreciate the value of his work. In the poem, a husband is angered that his wife doesn’t have lunch ready when he gets home. She explains to him, “I have mor to doo then I doo may⁴” (ll. 34). She’s prioritized her work over the well being of her husband by not providing a meal for him after a hard day in the field. He responds by saying, “Wery! Yn the devylles nam!...what hast thou to doo, but syttes her at hame?⁵” (ll. 37-38), and proceeds to call her a gossip (ll. 39-40). He’s angry that, even though he works hard to provide for the family, she can’t seem to

¹ God, the devil take you!

² Beat her, you say? Yes, so that she stinks! And every stroke will lay her on the ground!

³ Sweetheart

⁴ I have more to do than I can.

⁵ Hmph! In the devil’s name, what do you do but sit at home?

take time out of her busy schedule of talking with the neighbors to do him a kindness. He continues to belittle her and minimize the value of her work later in the poem by telling her the things she does only need to be done once every two weeks (Ballad, footnote 4). The wife is made to look like an inconsiderate, lazy woman who cares only about herself and her own entertainment, who only does work when it is convenient to her.

However, neither of these two texts truly succeed in using their misogynist strategies to create weak, disempowered female characters. The wife in "Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband" lists everything she is expected to do in the day over the span of nearly a page and a half. She mentions 16 activities she must do daily: make butter and cheese; feed the chickens; clean the house; and so on (ll. 41-60 & 65-76). This is a stark contrast to the husband's single daily duty of tending to the field, especially since the husband has a field hand to help him with his labor. Everyday "The Goodman and his lade to the plow be gone,"⁶ (ll. 21) while it is explained of the wife, that "servant had she none"⁷ (ll. 22). She does just as much, if not more work in a day than her husband, and she does so completely unaided. When they decide to switch jobs for a day, she *still* has to teach him how to accomplish simple tasks like making a fire in the oven (ll. 101-104). As hard as the husband tries to degrade his wife and devalue the work she does, it's clear to the audience that the wife does a significant amount of difficult and important work. Though the husband's work may be more obviously physically demanding, the wife's work is just as important. In seeing how much she must do in a day simply to keep her home running, she generates understanding from the reader while making her husband look like a brutal, unsympathetic tyrant.

Similarly, *Johan Johan* fails to create a weak female character in Tib. Though she may be loathsome and revolting, Tib, like the wife in "Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband," is the one in control of the household. At the beginning of the play, when Johan goes on his three-page tirade, he stops immediately after realizing Tib is within earshot of him. When she asks him whom he was talking about beating, he tells her he was just talking about tenderizing fish (ll. 114). Though it seems sick to say, he is too scared of his wife to act on what he promised the audience he would do to her. Later in the play, after Sir Johan has come for dinner, Tib vocalizes how she runs the household: "Now, by my truth, it is a pretty jape/For a wife to make her husband an ape"⁸ (ll. 513 -514). Not only does Tib recognize she has the power in the relationship between her and Johan, she derives pleasure and amusement from publicly emasculating her husband and exposing his weakness. If the other text is named "Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband," *Johan Johan* might as well be named *Ballad of a Tyrannical Wife*. Tyrants don't require sympathy, just power, and Tib has it in excess.

Ultimately however, the ballad stands out as a much more feminist text than *Johan Johan*. Though create misogynistic portraits of women, the ballad does so with the purpose of making the husband the character to be reviled, not the wife. The husband is referred to as "tyrannical" in the title, and the first two stanzas of the poem are a plea from the author to defend women from unfair blame (ll. 5-8). Additionally, the wife must teach her husband to make bread, take care of the children, and cook, because he doesn't know how. This

⁶ The husband and his servant boy go to the plow.

⁷ She had no servant.

⁸ Now, I can honestly say, it's such a funny joke for a wife to make her husband and ape.

makes him look incompetent and ultimately, he looks like the weaker of the two characters. In contrast, Tib's character fails to generate sympathy because she's the antagonist of the story: she is demanding, cruel, and unfaithful. It's also worth noting that, while the ballad is a defense of women, *Johan Johan* was written as a comedic play. "*Johan Johan* is a brilliant satirical comedy," the editor of the text explains (pg. 1), which makes Tib's power problematic to reading her as a pro-feminist character. If the play is meant to be a comedy, then humor derives the perceived implausibility of Tib's power over Johan. The comedic focal point of the play implies that it would be ridiculous to think of a wife ever having power over her husband; she can never be both powerful and taken seriously at the same time, making the play a decidedly antifeminist writing.

Though both these texts try to say something about their female subjects, they inevitably end up also speaking volumes about the men who wrote them. Because it is so starkly anti-feminist, it seems impossible to try and view Heywood as pro-woman. How could he be, when the "hilarity" of his play is centered on the "farce" of a powerful woman? And, though the author of "The Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband" remains unknown, his sympathetic plea for the wives of his town at the beginning of the poem, in addition to contrasting the volume of the wife work with the incompetency of her husband, makes picturing the author as a feminist (or as close to one as existed in the Middle Ages) surprisingly easy. This diversity in opinion and attitude works to undermine the common perception of the Middle Ages as completely barbaric and uncivilized, especially toward women, and shows just how different (and in some cases, similar) they were to the times we live in now.