

Love, lust, or loyalty in the canterbury tales

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The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories written between 1387 and 1400 by Geoffrey Chaucer. The stories detail stories that a group of pilgrims tells while they travel to Canterbury. Chaucer had many goals when writing this collection of stories.

Since he lives in the medieval time period, a person's social status was extremely influential and affected every aspect of a person's life. One of Chaucer's reasons for writing was to satirize how corrupt the estates of their social system were. The Church dominated this social system and they used their prime positions to the greatest capacity, even abusing their power, followed by the Nobility, and then the Peasantry, which was comprised of the largest number of people who faced the most inadequate conditions. He also includes numerous instances of fraud, perversion, and hypocrisy among members of the clergy, further demonstrating the corruption of medieval society within the Church. Another incentive that inspired Chaucer's writings was the desire to display many varieties of opinions on marriage and love. Throughout The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, marriage is displayed in many ways as seen through the lustful view in "The Wife of Bath's Tale", the genuine and unconditional love in "The Franklin's Tale", the bitter opinion on love in "The Merchant's Tale", and the expectation of obedience from a wife to her husband in "The Clerk's Tale" proving that marriage is a dynamic concept that is unique for everyone.

Alisoun exhibits a materialistic and superficial portrayal of marriage throughout her numerous marriages that she pursues during "The Wife of Bath's Tale." One major theme in the Wife of Bath's Tale is Alison's desire for financial independence through her marriages and use of her sexuality. This

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is evident in her pragmatic approaches to her first marriage with a wealthy older man and her second marriage. She used her body as a means of control and to gain financial benefits from them (Trudeau 2). Alisoun thinks that polygamy is the only way to quench her sexual appetite and find financial stability is through annexing many husbands throughout her life. She believed this is natural and discourages monogamy by describing it as unnecessary since having multiple marriages is not explicitly banned in the bible.

(Kittredge 95). Alisoun justifies her multiple marriages by describing the instances of polygamy throughout scripture: “ I am free to wed, in God’s name, where it pleases me. He says that to be wedded is no sin; Better to marry than to burn within..... I know well Abraham was a holy man, And Jacob, too, as far as know I can; And each of them had spouses more than two; And many another holy man also. Or can you say that you have ever heard That God has ever by His express word Marriage forbidden?” (Wife of Bath’s Tale Prologue 173). Her lusty approaches to love also drove her to seek satisfaction away from her husband: “ She admitted that she had a healthy sexual appetite and alluded to the fact that she may quench those appetites outside of wedlock.

Her fourth husband was young and lusty, and even kept a mistress. During this fourth marriage, Alisoun began courting Jankyn, a younger man without financial independence.”(Trudeau 2). She courted many men outside of wedlock and struggled to remain faithful when restricted to only one man at a time. Many of Alison’s views on marriage were considered unorthodox and went against major Church doctrines and beliefs.

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One of these beliefs that she discards is the Church's glorification of Virginité. She believes the concept of virginité is not required of us and she resents the fact that so many people withhold using their bodies because of this concept. She believes that God created human bodies for sexual use and that since it is never explicitly ridiculed against, people have the right to use them freely (Kittredge 94). Throughout "The Wife of Bath's Tale," Alison's polygamy, sexual appetite, and crave for wealth all propel her to display a lusty view on marriage. Contrary to the views of Alisoun, "The Franklin's Tale" illustrates a marriage between Dorigen and Arveragus that is based on unconditional love and filled with loyalty and gentillesse. When Dorigen and Arveragus got married, they both made vows to please each other to the best of their abilities.

Arveragus promises to respect Dorigen and to withhold jealousy while Dorigen promises to never be the root of disagreements between them. They vowed to keep these promises for the rest of their lives (Nelson 8). Their controversial promises challenge many Middle Aged beliefs about true love inside of marriage: "It was a regular theory of the Middle Ages that the highest type of chivalric love was incompatible with marriage, since marriage brings it mastery, and mastery and love cannot abide together. This view the Franklin boldly challenges. Love can be consistent with marriage, he declares. Indeed, without love (and perfect, gentle love) marriage is sure to be a failure.

" (Kittredge 100). Unlike any other marriage in the Canterbury Tales, the marriage between the two contains loyalty even when a young squire also falls in love with the knight's wife. The Franklin's goal was to defy the <https://assignbuster.com/love-lust-or-loyalty-in-the-canterbury-tales/>

opinions of the other travelers and show an exemplary couple who maintain their love through all trials they encounter. One hardship that Dorigen and Arveragus encounter is their separation when Arveragus was forced to move to Britain for a work excursion. In Arveragus absence, a young squire tries to pursue Dorigen.

Although the possibility of the squire makes Dorigen question whether Arveragus will fulfill her needs as her husband, she is consistent with her loyalty and denies the squire out of love and respect for her vow of marriage. Another view that challenged the typical marriage roles of the time was that Dorigen was not submissive to Arveragus' wants. When they got married, Arveragus and Dorigen both promised to equally love and respect one another and put their love above all else: " Love will not be constrained by mastery; When mastery ' comes, the god of love anon Beats his fair wings and farewell! He is gone! Love is a thing as any spirit free..... Observe who is most patient in his love, He is advantaged others all above. Patience is virtue high, and that's certain; For it does vanquish, as these clerks make plain. Things that oppression never could attain.

" (The Franklin's Tale 4). The two both hold the belief that if one person subjugates the other, the marriage will not be a success. Throughout " The Franklin's Tale," Dorigen and Arveragus display a marriage of pure gentle love and loyalty through their perennial commitment to one another through all the hardships their marriage endures. " The Merchant's Tale" offers a unique view of marriage through the experiences and perspectives of January and the Merchant himself. The Merchant possesses a negative view of marriage and all it entails because of his own short-lived marriage. This <https://assignbuster.com/love-lust-or-loyalty-in-the-canterbury-tales/>

experience has caused him to regard wives as less valuable than even servants because they have rights to their husband's property and possessions.

The Merchant's main motive behind his negative view on marriage is the impact that his previous marriage had on his wealth and opportunity. He does not consider love as an aspect whatsoever and views marriage as simply a mercantile transaction that should bring him fortune and success. Since he is in debt after his three months of marriage, he evaluates the whole marriage as a failure (Murray 1). On the contrary, his character January suggests entirely different motives for marriage. January has a highly optimistic view on marriage and is desperate for a wife in his old age: "To take a wife it is a glorious thing, Especially when a man is old and hoar; Then is a wife the fruit of all his hoard.

Then should he take a wife young and fair, On whom he might engender an heir, And all his life in joy and solace pass, While all the bachelors may sing 'alas!'" (The Merchant's Tale 285). He describes marriage with optimism and enthusiasm and sees the potential that a wife has to benefit her husband. January regards a wife as someone who encourages the husband to work towards success when he is struggling and states that a wife's job is to fulfill the needs of the household. Although he takes these requirements into consideration, his primary requirement is that his sexual appetite is filled (Nelson 5). He believes that a wife is an orthodox way to satisfy his lust, and the other benefits that come along with it just emphasize its glory: "What January wants is more than an obedient carer. He wants a sex-slave.

Marriage, he believes, would offer a “lusty life” without fear of the eternal damnation that was the penalty for fornication..... So marriage would permit him to have as much sex as his appetite desired” (Murray 1). If she fails these requirements, January says he will have to turn to adultery. “The Merchant’s Tale” displays two insights on marriage that differ greatly, since The Merchant himself views a wife as a hindrance from success, while January visions a wife as a lusty partner made for his satisfaction and benefit. “The Clerk’s Tale” is implemented to prove that obedience and submission from the wife to the husband is a crucial aspect of a successful marriage, according to the Clerk.

This proof is found through the marriage between King Walter and Griselda, a simple peasant girl. When asking for Griselda’s hand in marriage, Walter demands that she must always submit to his desires and never show any defiance towards anything he says or does: ‘Griselda,’ he said, ‘you must understand. It is pleasing to your father and to me That I wed you, and it may thus stand..... I say you must be ready with good heart To do my pleasure, and that I freely may Do as I think best, whether you laugh or smart, And never must you grudge it, night or day, And also when I say “yes”, never say “nay”, Neither in words nor frowning countenance.

Swear this, and here I swear to our alliance.’ (The Clerk’s Tale 251). Although Griselda agrees and never breaks these terms, Walter makes Griselda undergo several tests of loyalty to prove she will always stay true to her promise of obedience no matter how severe the circumstance. He first tells her that her first daughter must be slain and she responded that she and her

daughter are both obedient respondents to his will. She responds similarly in response to his demand that her son must also be taken and be slain.

Her final test of loyalty was when he demands that she returns to her father so he can search for a new wife. She offers to resistance and simply asks for clothes to cover her on her journey back to her father's house (Nelson 10-11). Griselda remains true to the promise she made to her husband to never refute any of his ideas or requests: " Though she acknowledges that she does not wish to die, Griselda says she would rather die than fail to live up to her agreement. And apparently, she does live up to her basic marriage promises..... Time passes, Walter's testing of Griselda's ability to fulfill her marriage promises begins, and Griselda shows herself to be true to her formally spoken the word.

" (Nelson 10). After Walter recognizes Griselda's loyalty to her marital promises, he reveals that the phony bride to be was actually their first daughter. He restores his marriage to her and also returns her son. They are able to love happy ever after and their children grow up to be successful and wealthy in their father's footsteps (Nelson 11). The dedication and obedience that Griselda shows to King Walter, demonstrates a view on marriage that is based on submission and male supremacy in relationships, which was common in the medieval age.

In The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, the different portrayals of marriage throughout the " The Wife of Bath's Tale", " The Franklin's Tale", " The Merchant's Tale", and " The Clerk's Tale" support the conclusion that marriage is a unique concept that is different for every person who

experiences it. During “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, Alisoun presents marriage as a device that she utilizes to enhance her sexual appetite. She encourages polygamy, resents virginity, and upholds the view that women are sexual beings who have the right to use their bodies to their full potential. “The Franklin’s Tale,” on the other hand, displays a picturesque love between a knight, Arveragus, and his wife Dorigen. Although it was rare in the medieval ages, Dorigen and Arveragus manage to portray the epitome of true love in marriage as they maintain their loyalty to one another and dedication to their vow of marriage throughout all they face in life, even when a young squire attempts to pursue Dorigen. The Merchant details his own life experiences on the topic of marriage and contrasts them with the views of January, a character from his tale.

The merchant feels that marriage is more detrimental than advantageous, while January’s mentality is that marriage brings prosperity through the wife’s dedication to her husband while appeasing his sexual appetite. Lastly, “The Clerk’s Tale” focuses on the wife’s obedience and surrender of free will to her husband, as seen through the relationship of Griselda and King Walter. King Walter demands that she never questions any thought, action, or command that he makes, and Griselda must prove her dedication to these demands by passing a series of tests that Walter produces. Although The Canterbury Tales were written many years ago, they still offer many different depictions of marriages that are relevant today since marriage is still a very controversial topic that affects every person who decides to pursue matrimony.