

# Comparing feminist ideologies from chaucer's canterbury tales and bronte's jane e...

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## **Feminism: Now vs Then**

The Wife of Bath from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Jane Eyre from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* represent the "radical" feminist ideologies of their respective time periods. Both women do not need a man to think for them, but the Wife of Bath introduces the idea of "sovereignty" and power over her husband while Jane observes that "women feel just as men feel," (136) advocating for an equal playing field for both sexes. While the Wife of Bath is a pioneer for women of her time, labeling her story as "feminist" is wrong in today's society because the modern definition of feminism is the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Although Chaucer may have been advocating for women's rights, the *Canterbury Tales* is still written from the point of view of a privileged male poet as opposed to a woman who has experienced the oppression of a patriarchal society. The Wife of Bath is a fake feminist character who only superficially rebels against male dominance while Jane Eyre effectively destroys the gender stereotypes leveled against her.

Both Jane and the Wife of Bath challenge the medieval subjugation of women, but, in the end, the Wife of Bath accepts the suppression while Jane continues to stay firm with her principles. In her tale, The Wife of Bath advocates for a world where what women most desire is to have "the self-same sovereignty/over her husband.../and master him; he must not be above her" (286). However, in the conclusion of her story, the ugly wife turns "young and lovely, rich in charms" (292) and becomes submissive to the husband, declaring she will be a "loyal, true, and humble wife/that never will

displease..." (291). additionally, as independent, bold, and unapologetic as she is, The Wife of Bath is depicted as always in need of a husband. Whether she truly enjoys having sovereignty over a husband or enjoying sex, Chaucer is ironically asserting the dominance of the patriarchal society over women. The Wife of Bath is depicted as knowing no other role to play besides that of a wife who is good to her husband or eagerly awaits the next one. While Jane Eyre longs for companionship, she also values her principles and sense of self over needing a husband. Forced to choose between marrying Mr. Rochester, the man she loves, and becoming simply a "mistress" to him and losing her sense of self-respect, Jane picks her sense of principle over passion. Although she wonders how she can leave someone she loves after a life of loneliness and neglect, she realizes "the more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (385). Ultimately, it is Jane's strength of principle and self-interest that makes her relationship with others more meaningful as opposed to the Wife of Bath's perpetual need to have a man to satisfy her sense of self-respect.

Chaucer's internal discrimination against women is also shown in the Wife of Bath's name. Her name is given as "Allison," (280) yet Chaucer only refers to her as the "Wife of Bath." Instead of giving her an identity and making her into a person, he simply labels her as her husband's property. In contrast, Jane Eyre is a fully fleshed-out, flawed, and emotionally complex character whose identity is an integral part of the story. While Jane began her life as a submissive and discarded orphan, the hardships and tribulations she faces in life transforms her into a woman with a strong character and sense of morality. It is Chaucer as male poet, not Allison as a female

character, who attempts to depict a world where women escape gender discrimination. While his intentions may have been for empowering women, he simply writes a tale that reproduces and reinforces the male attitude of the time. Charlotte Bronte, on the other hand, effectively used Jane Eyre as a way to tear down societal norms and to criticize ideas that needed to be changed. Jane Eyre is more feminist because Jane truly destroys gender stereotypes while the Wife of Bath perpetuates them.