

The roles of women in medieval society in the wife of bath



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Chaucer portrays the Wife of Bath, also known as Alison, as an unique individual in the General Prologue. Alison is a very pretty woman with a bold, red face that signal[s] her temperament (Hallissy 42). Additionally, her bright red stockings, new shoes, handmade kerchiefs, large hat, and spurs on her shoes... flaunt her wealth and status... (Slover 244) and exemplify her constant need for attention.

Chaucer also introduces Alison's sexuality by illustrating... gap-teeth, set widely... (GP 15), a characteristic viewed as very sexual during the fourteenth century. The Wife of Bath is proficient in cloth making as Chaucer explains, She better[s] those of Ypres and of Ghent (GP 15), two of the most renowned cloth making capitals of Europe. Alison has also embarked on many previous pilgrimages to locations such as Rome and Jerusalem thrice (GP 15). Her decision to join Chaucer's pilgrimage is interesting because during the time... good women, especially widows, were advised to protect their virtue by staying at home (Hallissy 43). In addition to her income from her cloth making business, the Wife of Bath has ample resources to fund her pilgrimages through inheritances from her five late husbands, one from whom she most likely gained the cloth business. Having more than one husband was very rare during the fourteenth century as Most widows did not remarry, and were often left to fend for themselves (Slover 247). However, because Alison has wealth from previous marriages, she never has an issue after one of her husbands passes away.

The roles of women in medieval society were very different for each woman based on her social class, but most took on the role of wife, widow, or mother (Slover 243). Women's lives were often shaped by inheritances from <https://assignbuster.com/the-roles-of-women-in-medieval-society-in-the-wife-of-bath/>

their families and husbands, but they often did not have input in whom they married (Johnston 739). Additionally, women were expected to marry very young because they had a natural duty to produce children for medieval men. Middle class women often stayed home and took care of the house, and many... kept busy with necessary crafts such as spinning, weaving, and embroidering (740). The Wife of Bath represents many of the roles that women during the fourteenth century had, but she is also an individual, who defies the norms of medieval women. She was married very young to her first husband without her consent, but she does not have any children. Additionally, cloth making is a craft that she has developed and in which she has superlative skill. Finally, the Wife of Bath's most unique quality is her sexuality. She has had a total of five husbands, and combined with her... other company in youth (Chaucer, GP 15), she seems to know how to make men want her even in her old age. Chaucer creates a vivid image of Alison in the General Prologue, one which he continues to develop through the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue could be considered a tale in and of itself because of the section's sheer length and the amount of information revealed about Alison. She begins her Prologue by speaking of the difference between authority and experience, as well as about how "... marriage is a misery and a woe"(Chaucer, WBP 258). However, as she begins to discuss her relationships with her husbands, the reader begins to wonder if... the woes arguably belong to her husbands rather than herself (Rossignol 385). The Wife of Bath associates authority with men because during medieval England knowledge came from the Bible and other books written and read

solely by men, specifically the clergy. Therefore, she believes that Authority allows men to control women through books... (Hallissy 106). However, she describes the way in which she uses sex and argumentation to control her husbands in order that she may... redefin[e] the nature of authority (Hallissy 105).

Alison tells the pilgrims that “ The three [husbands] that I call “ good” were rich and old”

(Chaucer, WBP 263). During the Middle Ages in England, women did not have many choices for making money. Therefore, the Wife of Bath chose her first three husbands based on the wealth she had an opportunity to gain, because... widows gained legal autonomy and usually inherited one-third of the property (Phillips 96) of her deceased husband. Because they were already old and nearing the age of death, she could acquire a wealth and her authority quickly by marrying these men. Alison uses sex as a means to gain control over her husbands. Until her husband gave all of his land and money into her control, she withheld sex from him. By abusing her power of sex,... the Wife of Bath’s only goal is to achieve dominance over her husband (Hallissy 113). She also uses the power of argumentation against her husbands. Alison accused her husbands of unlawful acts continuously so that they did not have an opportunity to voice their suspicions, and so that when the argument was over, the husbands were so exhausted that they did not have the energy to fight back. The Wife of Bath views... argumentation [as] a way of gaining power (Hallissy 115).

The last part of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue is her detailed explanation of her fourth and fifth husbands. Both husbands were younger men because she <https://assignbuster.com/the-roles-of-women-in-medieval-society-in-the-wife-of-bath/>

now had the financial stability to marry someone younger, considering A younger, poorer, but more attractive husbands would be a luxury that only a well-heeled widow could afford (Hallissy 115). The fourth was a partier who was unfaithful to Alison, so she attempted to show her authority by trying to make him jealous. Before the fourth was even cold in his grave, she had found another man named Jankyn (Phillips 98) and married him.