

The wife of bath feminism in the middle ages



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Throughout Chaucer's tales, he was trying to teach the truth about society as a whole. In one particular tale, he exposed a more modern and less addressed topic, feminism. In the Middle Ages, women were considered inferior to their male counterparts.

Women struggled with being heard, respected, and valued. The Wife of Bath's Tale written by Chaucer exposes these unfair struggles women had to face. In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Wife of Bath* is the face and voice of Feminism and Women's Rights. Through the story that *The Wife of Bath* shares with the other travellers, she challenges the traditional role of women and teaches the travellers that women desire equality in marriage. *The Wife of Bath* was a woman who defied the standard view of women during the Middle Ages. She had many husbands and multiple sexual partners in her life. Her very existence went against the natural law of man. In her prologue, lines 9-13, *The Wife of Bath* states, "But someone told me not so long ago That since Our Lord, save once, would never go To wedding that at Cana in Galilee, Thus, by this same example, showed he me I never should have married more than once." The Bible says a woman should only marry once in her life and no more. *The Wife of Bath* believes that virginity is a pure blessing, but it is not meant for her. In line 145-150 of her prologue, she says, "Christ was a maid, and yet shaped like a man, And many a saint, since this old world began, Yet has lived ever in perfect chastity. I bear no malice to virginity; Let such be bread of purest white wheat-seed, And let us wives be called but barley bread;". What the wife is saying is that Christ was born a male virgin, has been a saint since the beginning of the world and lived in perfect chastity". She doesn't envy or goes against virginity, for virgins are

pure and rich, bread of purest white wheat-seed, (line 149) and wives are seen as not so pure and much cheaper, wives be called but barley bread, . (line 150)

The Wife of Bath was a huge supporter of equality in marriage. She believed women and men had to share dominance equally to be able to support a healthy relationship. Jone Johnson Lewis said, "And she takes on the reality that violence towards women was common and considered acceptable. One of her husbands hit her so hard that she went deaf in one ear; she did not accept the violence as man's prerogative only and so she hit him back" on the cheek.. The wife didn't let anyone or anything stand in the way of her beliefs. Especially in the difficulties that Erin Ross states, Alexandra Losonti argues that in the Middle Ages women were identified by their roles in life and society as wives, widows, mothers or maidens and were portrayed in relation to a man or group of men.. Hence her title, The Wife of Bath, but truly her real name was Alison. This was a woman who defied the stereotype of women being inferior to men around them. Even her knowledge and education (Ross) go beyond the knowledge of typical women (Ross) during the Middle Ages.

According to Jonathan Blake, "While apparently attempting to assert female dominance over men, the effect the wife desires is to bring men and women to a more balanced level of power.. The Wife's fifth husband used his education in a despicable manner to show dominance over her. They got into a fight that leads to him realizing he must be submissive, causing a new level of respect and kindness between them. Blake says, "The wife then achieves what she wanted through all her shrewish behavior: the realization

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of a relationship in which the partners mutually respect each other and share the power.. The tale the wife tells is about a knight who rapes a girl thought to be peasantry, but actually was nobility. Queen Guinevere gives him twelve months and one day to find the answer of what women truly desire, if he didn't find the right answer he would be executed. He meets an old hag who in exchange to do the first thing she asks of him, gives him the correct answer. He agrees, returns home with the answer and is spared. The hag comes out and tells the queen of their deal for giving him the correct answer. The hag wants the knights hand in marriage. He begs her, saying he will do anything else just leave his body free and out of the equation. He has no choice but to accept for it was the first thing she asked of him. On their wedding night the knight refuses to consummate the marriage, so the hag gives him a choice. She can be beautiful if she has control and he is submissive, or she can stay ugly and he keeps control. Scared and confused he lets her choose so he doesn't have to. She decides to be beautiful and lets him stay in control because he gave her the power to choose. Blake also states, The relationship that develops between the knight and the hag also illustrates the wife's intention of showing that submission to the desires and needs of women does not result in the male being dominated.. In the end the Wife of Bath and her story's characters are all happy. Blake also tells the readers, the Wife of Bath believes that the only way for the happy medium to be achieved is to have the pendulum swing the other way for a while.. Which means that in a marriage, husband and wife must have a middle ground in order to sustain a healthy relationship.

The face and voice of Feminism and Women's Right in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales was a character known as The Wife of Bath. Through sharing her story with the other travellers, she defies the stereotypical role of women and teaches the travellers that in a marriage women desire equality. The Wife of Bath knows that the Bible says women should only marry once and having sexual relations before marriage is sinful, but the wife believes that if men can marry more than once, women can too. She also knows that virginity is considered precious and pure, and to save one's self for marriage was not in her cards. Because of her multiple marriages and many sexual partners, she believes herself to be an expert wife and by being a woman knows what women truly desire in a marriage. Her story teaches the travellers that when husband and wife understand the effort needed to create a stronger relationship is respect, kindness and the ability for both people to have control; then both husband and wife can create a balance between them. Women don't want or need dominance over men. They want the ability to voice their opinion. Women feel like they should have the same rights as men. The only way women can make men to understand the concept is for women to claim dominance over men and create a balance of equality. Once that balance is achieved so is the happy medium.