

Compare and contrast



The Wife of Bath and the Prioress In creating his Canterbury Tales, Chaucer introduced several characters that represented the extremes of the society in which he lived. Rather than being true representations of the times, these characters approach the realm of caricature in their personality makeup and behaviors. In several cases, he opted to throw two characters together who couldn't be more different, such as the Wife of Bath and the Prioress. These two women between them represent the two extremes of female roles in Chaucer's world. While the Wife of Bath is worldly in the true sense of the word whichever way it is interpreted, the Prioress is the medieval feminine ideal, soft-hearted almost to a fault and academically well-educated. These differences can be easily determined as early as the general prologue as each character is described. The Prioress is shown to be the ideal by the positive statements made of her and her pleasing physical appearance while the Wife of Bath is described with a much less pleasing appearance and behaviors that match.

The Prioress is described as possessing all of the attributes a man was supposed to look for in a woman in Chaucer's time. She was " smiling, modest was and coy" (General Prologue, The Prioress, 2). She could sing well in the proper way, speak French fluently, had excellent manners so that " never from her lips let morsels fall, / Nor dipped her fingers deep in sauce" (General Prologue, The Prioress, 11-12), was pleasant to be around in any company and was charitable almost to a fault. Physically, she is given attractive attributes such as a fine nose, bright blue eyes, a small red mouth and a fair forehead. Chaucer tells his reader, " truth to tell, she was not undergrown" (General Prologue, The Prioress, 39), indicating a pleasant figure that men are not supposed to notice in that way when looking at a <https://assignbuster.com/compare-and-contrast-compare-and-contrast-essay-samples-10/>

nun. Her clothing is neat and is well-maintained as would be expected of a lady high born.

The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, immediately breaks the rules of true womanhood by being involved in commerce as a highly skilled seamstress. This vocation not only makes her lowly because she works for a living, but because she is in charge of her income, something that a true woman in medieval times would never dream of wanting. Despite this talent, or perhaps because of it, her behavior is also that of a course, undesirable woman. She tells lewd tales, has been married at least five times and has countless other lovers besides who are only hinted at with the comment that these marriages were “not counting other company in youth” (General Prologue, Wife of Bath, 17). She’s well traveled, having seen such widespread places as Jerusalem, Rome, Boulogne, Santiago and Cologne, yet she is not nearly so well-spoken or educated as the Prioress. Her physical appearance is equally unattractive. To begin with, she is described as being “deaf in either ear” (General Prologue, Wife of Bath, 2). She has a bold face that is fair, yet is also described as red, indicating too much time spent in the weather or perhaps in the beer barrel, further suggesting a rough and base lifestyle far different from that of the Prioress. While it’s true her attire is described as being every bit as good as that of the Prioress, it is also described so as to indicate a ostentatious, flamboyant personality that demands attention.

From these simple descriptions, told in only a handful of lines, a very different picture emerges of each woman, quickly bringing to mind the lewd, bawdy woman of the streets who found her way into money as is indicated in the Wife of Bath as well as the ‘old money’ elegance of the educated and

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soft-spoken Prioress, who emerges as the ideal woman. While the Wife of Bath tells a story strong enough to make the innocent blush, the Prioress maintains her ladylike silence, allowing her priest to speak for her of good. The brilliance of Chaucer is that he can evoke such vivid images with such startling detail and complexity without overburdening the reader.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Canterbury Tales*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.