

The wife of bath character



In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* there happens to only be three female characters in the main story: The Prioress, the Second Nun, and the Wife of Bath. The Prioress is seen as an elegant and compassionate woman, who fits into the ideal woman category of the time. Conversely, the Wife of Bath is a crude and argumentative woman who always speaks her mind.

The main theme of the paper is to Analyze the Wife of Bath Character and to determine the meaning behind her inclusion in the tales. While many argue that the Wife of Bath's role in the text is as a simple a run-of-the-mill character utilized in a way that symbolizes anti-feminism, others believe that she is a realistic character that embodies Chaucer's not so anti-women stance. In order to conclude which side of the argument has more substantial evidence to support their claims, one must first examine the treatment of women during the 14th century, and then further analyze her prologue and tale with a feminist perspective in mind.

During the 14th century the gender roles were vastly different from what is seen today, but nonetheless a woman's role in society was extremely limited outside of royal families. The men of the time viewed women as child-bearers and expected them to live domestic lives during which they would rarely leave the confined space one's home. One of the only exceptions to this norm were the wives of peasant farmers who would tend to the fields to aid in supporting the family. Another norm of the age was that it was normal for women to marry young and have a partner much older than themselves. During the 14th century the church still was very much in control of Europe and their influence affected their views, that said virginity was viewed as purity and divorce was not a socially accepted idea of the time. That is why

the Wife of Bath, having been married five times, could be a controversial character and draw negative attention during the time period. Women of the time also weren't allowed to seek an education which led to most of them remaining illiterate for their entire lives, and domestic violence was another norm. Typically, the best path that a woman could pursue is a life devoted to God as a nun, since marriage was considered inferior to perpetual virginity (Suprayitno 11). This explains why in *The Canterbury Tales* the Prioress was so highly regarded.

Now that we have examined several of the norms and ideas of the age, we can begin analyzing the text. In the prologue of the Wife of Bath, she gives the reader a look into her life and her beliefs with this lengthy introduction of her character. During which she reveals that her real name is Alison, yet that doesn't change the fact that she is still known as the Wife of Bath. In her prologue, she speaks about her five past marriages, and states that three of them were good and two were bad (Chaucer and Ecker 195). The two bad ones were with men who were unfaithful, unruly, and not easily controllable, while the three good marriages that she had, of which she truly loved each partner, were with men that were wealthy, older, and easily controlled. She then went on to explain how she maintained the upper hand in those marriages. She shows the dominance and power a woman can have over their spouse through using false accusations and denying sexual favors, and he will be my debtor and slave, and in the flesh his troubles will be grave as long as I continue as his wife; for I will have the power all my life. Over his body, I and never he (155-159). She begins using Biblical references to validate and justify her unorthodox ideas, and beliefs that she had learned

from her life experiences. An Example of this was used to justify her having multiple partners over the course of her life. A holy man was Abraham yet each were with more than two wives came to dwell, Like many other holy men as well. (55-58) Her use of this can be interpreted as her stating that it was still seen as holy for men in the bible to have multiple wives over their lifetimes, yet she doesn't receive the treatment when people hear of her past. This is used to point out the hypocrisy in the double standard that had been placed on women.

Now that we have seen into the life of Alison via her prologue, it's time to further examine her tale to delve deeper into her character. Similarly, in her tale we are given a deeper look into Alison and her beliefs through her storytelling. At the beginning of her tale, a powerful knight violently rapes a young virgin maiden, and in result the knight is sent before the King who decides to let his wife to decide what his punishment will be. Queen Guinevere and her ladies of the court then decide to give the knight a quest: he must find what women desire most in the world, and if he fails to do so in a year, he will face death. As the end of his one year quickly approached, the young knight came across an old crone who promised him the answer in exchange for marriage, her answer is Women wish to have sovereignty as well over her husband as her love, and to have mastery over him (1042) . The two were later married, and the old hag asks if he would prefer her to be faithful and ugly, or faithless and beautiful. When the knight submits to his new wife, she transforms into a beautiful and faithful woman leading them to live happily for the rest of time. This signified the mastery that a woman can have over her husband. In this tale, we see further into the feminist

characteristics of Alison. Some scholars believe that the old crone in the tale was really an embodiment of the Wife of Bath, and the ending of the tale would be her idea of an ideal marriage that she could be happy being in.

Now that both the prologue and tale have been examined it's important to delve deeper into the ideas presented within this section of The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer makes use of irony in the tale by reversing the social norms of the era, giving women sovereignty over the men in the tale. This major shift in power dynamics, is used by both sides of the argument surrounding the Wife of Bath Character. On one side of the argument, those who believe that Alison was just a stock character, see this as something meant to only be comedic due to its polarization of the gender roles of the time. On the other hand, those who oppose this believe that the inclusion of the tale alludes back to central topics within the prologue, those being the topic of male violence and women having sovereignty over men in marriage and love. Alison also shows feminist qualities through her outspokenness to gender inequalities that occurred during the historical context of 14th century England and from Chaucer's life. A woman who acted similar to the Wife of Bath character would have been seen as eccentric and unusual during this time period.