

Can the wife of bath
be regarded as
honest?



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The Canterbury Tales presents the Wife of Bath as an honest woman in conflict with her society. "Honest" here takes on two meanings. It either implies that the Wife of Bath is a moral and Christian member of society or, more literally, that she in fact speaks the truth. If the latter is true, then her views place her in conflict with her society.

The Wife of Bath is by no means an "honest" woman in the first sense. In the first few lines of the prologue she is described as wearing "hosen... of fyn scarlet reed" to Church on Sunday. This choice of clothing is not appropriate for the occasion, showing that she shows little respect for formality. Furthermore, the choice of her "scarlet" clothing signifies her views towards sex, which we discover later. The scarlet somewhat relates a sense of a "red light" in the middle of what would be a church full of dark colours, perhaps alluding to her prostitute like ways. In addition, on the same page she is said to have had "housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five" and that "She hadde passed many a straunge strem". The former tells us that she has been married five times, and the second suggests - perhaps with some sexual connotations - that she travelled around a lot.

Chaucer is well known for physiognomy, and his description of the Wife of Bath pits her as "Gat-tothed", a woman who had a forehead "as brood as a bokeler" and also a woman who "amblere esily". All of the above suggest that she is an overtly sexual woman, with an appetite for sex, who was good looking and found getting around easy "for she koude of that art the olde daunce". Thus, even from the beginning of the prologue we are able to see that the Wife of Bath is definitely not an "honest" woman in the sense of the first definition of the word.

However, there is some debate as to whether or not the second definition can be seen as true. As Thomas Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*, “ True and false are attributes of speech, not of things. And where speech is not, there is neither truth nor falsehood. Error there may be, as when we expect that which shall not be; or suspect what has not been: but in neither case can a man be charged with untruth.” The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale are both records of that which she said on her journey to Canterbury. Thus, as Hobbes stipulates, her words are subject to being either true or false. However, although she may have said something that appears to be true, the facts may be wrong in some way, or altered, resulting in error.

Ultimately, whether the Wife of Bath is telling the truth or not, her views remain in conflict with those of contemporary society. The views of society during which Chaucer said were deeply enrooted in the Christian faith, particularly Catholicism. The *Canterbury Tales* were written amidst a period of strict religious belief and morality. Furthermore, events such as the Fall of Constantinople and the papal bull *Dum Diversas*, in 1453 and 1452 respectively, strengthened society’s demand for people to be pure of faith. The counter reaction of the Church to the spread of Islam into Europe, with the Moors in Spain and Turks encroaching on the boundaries of Europe ensured that the pronouncement of the Christian faith was stronger than ever. Thus, society ran according to a strict, religious moral code. Furthermore, during the time the *Canterbury Tales* were written there was still a feudal system in place in England. This archetypal social structure was paramount in the running of society and women were not regarded in it, as they were thought insignificant and subordinate to their husbands.

The Wife of Bath's outlook is greatly opposed to this state of affairs. When she pronounces that "Blessed be God that I have wedded five" she shows happiness that she has been wedded five times, regarding it as what should be done. She also "Welcome the sixte whan that evere he shal!" showing that she sees husbands as expendable. This is contrary to her society's view that marriage is sacred and that men are superior to women. Furthermore, she says that "sith I hadde hem hooly in myn hand" whilst referring to her husband's. This shows her perspective on men as inferior to her, an opposite view to that of the feudal system.

The Wife of Bath says "What sholde I take keep hem for to plesse, but it were for my profit and myn ese?" showing again that she gives little value to people, men in particular, unless she gains something from them and often challenges men and God about the ideas of virtue and virginity. This happens early on when she relates how "Abraham was an holy man, And Jacob eek.... And eech of hem hadde wives mo than two" in an effort to show that marriage should not be as sacred as society perceives it to be. Also, she says "Where can ye say in any manere age that hye God Defended marriage... or where he commanded he virginitee?" This statement alone disagrees strongly with contemporary society's views of chastity a holy trait and marriage a sacred institution. Thus it is the case that whether the Wife of Bath is an "honest" woman or not, her views are strongly opposed with that of her society.

It is apparent from my reading of the Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue is not an "honest" woman in the sense of my first definition. However, it becomes harder to see whether or not she is "honest" in the case of the second

definition. Although all that she says come from experience, she likely altered her stories to garner sympathy from other pilgrims; she hoped they would agree that society judges her too harshly. On the other hand, it is easy to see that many of the Wife of Bath's views contradict the strict moral code and Christian faith of her society. In sum, it is the analysis of the Wife of Bath's conflict with her society more than conceptions of honesty that aid my understanding of the Wife of Bath's tale.