

The rivals and the wife of bath



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Troubled by contemporary attitudes to morality, Chaucer and Sheridan effectively present their respective characters as reflecting the conflicting morals in their societies.

With marriages and justice in the Medieval era and 18th Century alike being based on feudalism and maintaining honour; Chaucer and Sheridan use their works as a medium to condemn contemporary morals. Furthermore, the use of deception in both 'The Wife of Bath' and 'The Rivals' allows Chaucer and Sheridan to convey to their audiences that their morals have been manipulated and distorted by society. For this reason, these writers indeed use their works as a means to evaluate and explore contemporary morals. Predominantly, Chaucer and Sheridan attack the immoral and flawed attitudes towards marriage.

The Wife's generalisation of her husbands in her Prologue, 'Alle were worthy men in hir degree' relates directly to common Medieval attitudes regarding marriage. In fact, the connotations of 'worthy' linking to financial gain represents how Medieval marriages were arranged to secure social and financial advancement, rather than whether the couple loved each other or not. Similarly, in 'The Rivals', Lydia's assertion that 'I lose most of my fortune if I marry without my aunt's consent' reciprocates the Wife of Bath's predicament; whereby any marriage was determined by the wealth of a potential suitor. In addition, this validates critic Loftis' view that the 'Social reality' of Sheridan's era involved 'The custom among affluent families of arranging marriages with close attention to property settlements'.

Interestingly, the notion of 'custom' conveys a sense of normality among

the Georgians, allowing Sheridan to effectively attack such a widely accepted tradition in 'The Rivals'.

Furthermore, Sheridan himself married for love, therefore by presenting his characters as marrying for financial gain; Sheridan demonstrates to his readers that marriage is being exploited to increase wealth, thus making it immoral. For this reason, the financial connotations to marriage, as noted by Chaucer and Sheridan allow them to demonstrate to their readers that the once sacred nature of marriage has become immoral due to an ongoing desire for financial gain. What is more, the justice system in both Chaucer and Sheridan's time is conveyed as being corrupt and immoral. In her Tale, the Wife explains the regular punishment that the Knight would have received for raping the maiden: 'By cours of lawe, and shoulde han lost his heed'. The rather extreme punishment the Wife depicts here of being decapitated, as seen through her use of violent language, was typical of the Chaucerian era, especially following the 1381 Peasants' Revolt.

Following this rebellion, punishments became so severe that illegal hunting often resulted in being hung, drawn and quartered. However, it is plausible that by allowing the Knight to escape the death penalty, Chaucer (via the Wife) is representing his lack of support for the arguably inefficient justice system. This is complimented by critic Stone, who stresses that the Wife is 'A kind of special representative of Chaucer', showing how Chaucer expresses his views, in this case regarding the morality of the justice system, via the Wife. Likewise, the justice system in 'The Rivals' is portrayed as immoral and ineffective. In the 18th Century, many disputes were settled via duelling, predominantly among the upper class. However, duelling was used to

maintain a gentleman's honour rather than enforce justice; representing it's immoral and flawed nature.

Sheridan presents the corrupt duelling via Bob Acres, ' Your honour follows you to the grave! ', with the use of the exclamation mark reiterating how it was genuinely believed at the time that duelling was a just and unbiased means of administering justice. Therefore, the condemnation of the justice systems by Sheridan and Chaucer represents how lawfulness had been completely contaminated with immorality in their eras. On a similar note, the theme of lies and deception is often viewed as another means by which Chaucer and Sheridan denounce contemporary morals. Lucy in ' The Rivals' is arguably a true representation of the lack of morals in the play. The tone evoked here, in her aside to the audience, ' Commend me to a mask of silliness, and a pair of sharp eyes for my own interest under it! ', portrays shrewdness and an effective deception of fellow characters. Sheridan's depiction of Lucy as untruthful would seem immoral to any audience, however, it can be argued that her deceitful presentation is intended to represent the structure of the Comedy of Manners rather than an attack of immoral society.

The Comedy of Manners involved ridiculing sophisticated classes as shown by Lucy's sly and cunning characteristics. Consequently, it is also plausible that Sheridan is not using Lucy as a medium to explore morality and only plays a key role in the structure of the play. Alternatively, it is possible that Chaucer presents the Wife as deceitful to channel his lack of support for misogynist views of women in the Medieval era. Due to the Church having a fundamental role in influencing social thinking patterns in Chaucer's day,

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interpretations of women were based on Eve's betrayal in the Garden of Eden and were thereby, particularly negative.

Therefore, the Wife's repentant tone with regards to her previous manipulation of one of her husbands, ' O Lord! The peyne I dide hem and the wo' compliments critic Ellis' view, ' The Wife is partly an exemplification of Medieval anti-feminism'. By Chaucer presenting the Wife as dishonest, he is effectively able to comply with these stereotypes of women, while contradicting them by equally depicting her as a headstrong character.

Overall, the presentation of deception allows the writers to condemn contemporary morals, notably the chauvinistic views regarding women. In conclusion, it cannot be denied that ' The Rivals' and ' The Wife of Bath' are mediums by which Sheridan and Chaucer evaluate contemporary morals respectively. Although Medieval and Georgian societies were centred very much so around feudalism and financial profit, as conveyed by marriage arrangements and the justice system; the writers attempt to illustrate that immorality has overshadowed any opportunity for love or justice to exist.

Additionally, the obvious deception among the characters, although arguably intended for comical purposes; rather reflects how morals have been ignored to such an extent that characters are even willing to conceal the truth from their loved ones. Therefore, instead of a ' forum for moralising', ' The Rivals' and ' The Wife of Bath' appear more as a plea from Sheridan and Chaucer to lay wealth and honour to one side and allow love, justice and morality to ensue.