

Challenging the social norms in the wife of bath



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The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer, is an assortment of stories by a group of pilgrims who are heading towards the Canterbury Cathedral. Chaucer addresses different stereotypes and distances his characters from the social norm. He did that by making them have memorable aspects and highly wry.

More specifically, in The Wife of Bath, Chaucer delve into the stereotypes of men and women, defining their basic wants and needs. The tale describes the wife of bath as an optimistic woman, knowledgeable, well cultured, and wealthy, which was rare for a woman back in the fourteenth century. As the story continues, so do the characters challenging the status quo.

Opening up the tale in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, in lines 11-12, the wife of bath establishes herself as an authoritative figure to marriage. Being married multiple times the wife of bath feels as if she is an expert in marriage, Chaucer's way of empowering her. She then continues on to tell the pardoner and other pilgrims a story about a knight. She goes on about a knight who raped a maiden. The knight raping the maiden challenged the traditional values of chivalry in the Middle Ages. The king wanted to condemn the knight by beheading him, however the queen offered another option, and the king gave way to her. With the king giving the queen the case, that alone challenges the social norm because back then women did not have a say, let alone men handing over their power to them. The queen told the knight to find out what women desire the most.

The knight travels far to find the answer, but was always coming back empty handed. Until one day he met an old ugly hag. The wife of bath continues to

tell the pilgrims that the hag made a deal with the knight and that if she gives him the answer, he would have to grant her wish. The hag tells the knight that the one thing women desire most is sovereignty over their spouses and lovers. The women as well as the queen agreed because the knight's life was spared. When the hag demanded for the knight to marry her, and ended up marrying her against his will. The hag gives the knight the power of choice and tells him that she could remain herself and be faithful or turn to a younger beautiful wife who is not faithful. The knight granting the hag her sovereignty, tells her that the choice was hers. The hag kissed the knight and turned to a younger woman and they both lived happily together.

Having that said, the knight has overcome hardships finding and in a way redeeming himself. Compared to how he was in the beginning, he has come a long way. He was first at a fixed mindset almost giving up and then turned to a growth mindset. He kept an open mind when he was given the power of choice. He learned from experience and thought it through, demonstrating a growth mindset, and told the hag that it was up to her whether or not she wanted to be faithful or not.