
The Morals And Importance Of Wife Of Bath's Tale In The Canterbury Tales

Every "April" in fourteenth century England, everyone from the aristocrats to the peasant class, excluding the royals and serfs, was required by the Church to make a pilgrimage to a holy destination. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, rife with satire, thirty pilgrims journey together to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury, England. To begin their adventure, the group meet in Southwark outside London. In an attempt to prevent boredom and make the journey more interesting, one of the pilgrims named Harry Bailly, who is the Host, recommends that each pilgrim create four stories. Each pilgrim is to create two tales on the way to the shrine and an additional two tales on the trip home for a total of 120 tales. The pilgrim chosen by Harry Bailly who creates the most interesting and moral story will win a meal paid by the other twenty-nine "losers" at the Tabard Inn upon the group's return. Although Chaucer intended 120 tales, only twenty-two tales were actually completed, along with an additional two fragments. Through the incorporation of the tales into the poem, *The Canterbury Tales* becomes a literary frame. Chaucer the Pilgrim, the narrator for the entire journey, illustrates the stories of each pilgrim. One of the pilgrims, the Wife of Bath may be one of the most eminent figures in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. To portray the Wife of Bath's lavish lifestyle and independent mindset, Chaucer uses satirical elements to embellish her life further. Chaucer has the uncanny ability to match tale to teller.

The Wife of Bath is an example of true beauty in Medieval society with "gap teeth, set widely" (Chaucer, GP15) and large hips. Additionally, Chaucer mentions that the Wife of Bath's face is "bold ..., handsome, and in a red hue" (15). The Wife of Bath's beautiful complexion and enjoyment of socializing "indicates a good-natured gregariousness" (Rossignol, "The Wife of Bath" par. 3). Having been married to five men, the Wife of Bath knows how to manipulate men into pleasing her.

A widow and a member of the middle class, the Wife of Bath has gained wealth through the inheritances of her five husbands and her successful cloth-making business. The Wife of Bath makes "kerchiefs ... of finely woven ground" (Chaucer, GP15) and sells them to others to provide for herself. As a member of the working middle class, the Wife of Bath justifies that a woman can be financially successful through employment and that "the dependency status of women in medieval society" (Howard par. 3) can change. Additionally, in the General Prologue, Chaucer implies that the Wife of Bath dresses tastefully with hose "of the finest scarlet red / And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new" (15). The Wife of Bath's "well set-up appearance, as has been suggested, is in keeping with the strong directness of her character" (Bowden par. 3). The Wife of Bath also rides "easily on an ambling horse" (Chaucer, GP15), concluding that "her clothing and the horse that she rides suggest prosperity" (Rossignol, "The Wife of Bath" par. 3). Chaucer has also added satirical elements to embellish the life of the Wife of Bath, "hinting at qualities such as pride, wrath, envy, and lust" (par. 3). More specifically, satirical elements can be seen in the fact that the Wife of Bath has been married five times "in addition to other 'company' (Chaucer, GP 15) in youth" (Rossignol, "The Wife of Bath" par. 3). Through the Wife of Bath's Prologue about her five husbands and her Tale about a knight searching for the key to love, many important details about her life are uncovered.

Chaucer first begins to develop the Wife of Bath's character in her Prologue, which introduces her "spirited vindication of her way of life—that is, of marriage and sexuality" (Ruud par. 2). Although the Wife of Bath has had multiple marriages, she believes nothing is wrong in her doings because the five marriages have all been approved by the Church. Still, many may question how one can truly and faithfully love all five husbands, especially if the Wife of Bath is open to the idea of a sixth husband after the death of the fifth. Additionally, during the pilgrim's discussion about virginity and marriage, the Wife of Bath defends that marrying multiple times does not and should not be criticized. Although many of the pilgrims support Christ's belief in one marriage in a lifetime, the Wife of Bath asserts that God never intended for everyone "to follow in His footsteps" (Chaucer, WBP 261) and implies "she never heard a definition of those numbers" (Bloom par. 2). The pilgrims continue to examine Saint Paul's belief that the wife and the husband owe each other "the 'marriage debt' (that is, sexual pleasure)" (Ruud par. 3). The Wife of Bath evidently agrees that both should be responsible to pay. Toward the end of her Prologue, the Wife of Bath alludes that she has had three "good" husbands, who treated her as an equal in the relationship, and two "bad" husbands, who consumed the power in the marriage. The Wife of Bath has found that she is happiest in a marriage in which she attains the power, which is proven when she says, "I'll have a husband yet / Who shall be both my debtor and my slave / And bear his tribulation to the grave" (Chaucer, WBP 262). In other words, she would obtain control by accusing her husband of being at fault.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue endorses her personality because her Prologue proves that each marriage has left a lasting impact on her character and has developed her into a more independent woman. During her first marriage, the Wife of Bath realized she wanted to hold the power in the relationship; her obtaining of power can be seen in her other marriages. The Wife of Bath learns to gain the power by refusing to sleep with her husbands "until they [give] her control of their property" (Rossingol, "Wife of Bath's Prologue" par. 2). Additionally, the Wife of Bath's fourth husband had a mistress, and she is proud to assert "that she was his Purgatory on Earth" (Bloom par. 9) by causing him to suffer when she pretended to be interested in another man. Through the Wife of Bath's past discussed in her Prologue, readers can see that her previous life and marriages affect her profoundly.

Additionally, the Wife of Bath's Prologue is well-suited for her lifestyle. The Prologue is largely Christ and saints' beliefs about a religious marriage. While the Wife of Bath protests that her marriages were all Church-approved "at the church door" (Chaucer, GP 15), most of the other pilgrims would argue the marriages were anything but Christian. The Prologue's central topic about Christ's definition of a good Christian marriage is ironic because the Wife of Bath believes she is moral by describing that her marriages comply with Christ's definition of a religious married life by finding the loopholes.

The other pilgrims have varying reactions to the Wife of Bath's Prologue. The Pardoner, for example, interrupts the Wife of Bath in the middle of her Prologue announcing, "I was about to take a wife; alas! / Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear? / There'll be no marrying for me this year!" (Chaucer, WBP 262). Clearly, the Pardoner has no interest in marrying anymore for fear that his wife will arrogate all of the power. On the other hand, the Summoner and the Friar are amused by the Wife of Bath's Prologue because of its length and her imprudent past. The Friar sarcastically says, "This is a long preamble to a tale!" (280), to which the Summoner replies, "You're spoiling all our fun with your commotion" (281). The other pilgrims are able to learn further about the Wife of Bath's life and prepare for her Tale, which is a Breton lai.

The lessons behind the Wife of Bath's Tale illustrate "that a happy marriage actually occurs when there is mutual love, respect, and kindness" (Ruud par. 9), meaning that the Wife of Bath is happiest in a relationship in which she and her husband share the power, a concept that flouts the social standards. As the Wife of Bath is talking to the other pilgrims on the journey about her "happy" marriages, she reveals that her criteria for a successful marriage are achievable in Middle Ages society. Another important feature about the Tale is that the knight surrenders his dominance, rather than simply giving it away forcefully such as in situations the Wife of Bath has created for her husbands. The Wife of Bath unwittingly wants this "token submission on the part of the husband" (Howard par. 5) in marriage but has never had a relationship thus far.

The Wife of Bath's Tale is well connected to her lifestyle for many reasons. The Wife of Bath's Tale about a couple happily sharing power together in a marriage is her ideal marital relationship, which is what she has always been trying to achieve in each of her marriages. The Wife of Bath's Tale is appropriate for her because she wants independence in a marriage. The woman in the Tale is granted independence from her husband as the Wife of Bath has been yearning for this type of freedom from her husbands.

The Tale evokes a debate among the other pilgrims, as some argue that it invokes a "marriage debate' [among] ... the Merchant, Clerk, and Franklin" (Ruud par 10). The other pilgrims agree that the Wife of Bath's Tale does support her beliefs and morals as the Tale reflects her desires in life. Through her actions, the Wife of Bath proves that any woman can "live the best life that she can for herself in a repressive, male-dominated society" (Rossignol, "The Wife of Bath" par. 1). Thus, the Wife of Bath is truly unlike any other character in The Canterbury Tales, and the themes in her Tale match her beliefs in life and marriage.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer has the uncanny ability to match tale to teller. As the thirty pilgrims travel to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine, twenty-four tales are shared; each has a unique moral teaching and plot line which profoundly suits the teller's personality and past. The Wife of Bath incorporates her outrageous past into her tale creating a meaningful yet valuable lessons from her tale. The most prominent lesson of her tale is to give women equal power in a relationship, as the link will then become stronger for the two people.