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## The Role Of Women In The Late Middle Ages In The Prologue Of The Wife Of Bath's Tale

The exquisitely decorated Ellesmere Chaucer is considered to be one of the most significant and high quality illuminated manuscripts of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, currently owned by the Huntington Library in California. Chaucer wrote the Tales during the fourteenth century, a time when the social structure was rapidly progressing. He addresses this change of events through "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale," which illustrates the unequal distribution of power within the male governed Medieval society. Women were not identified by their occupations or social status, but solely by their affiliations with men; a woman was either maiden, spouse, or widow, who was solely capable of 'women's work' such as bearing children and cooking. "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale" challenges this double standard and the Medieval social belief that women are inherently inferior, attempting to establish a defence of secular women's sovereignty that opposes the conventions available to her.

Chaucer's choice to focus on the proletariat in the stories of The Canterbury Tales validate that he is purposefully writing about women to challenge the norms in Medieval society. Written in Middle English, the story follows a group of pilgrims who are travelling the lengthy journey from London to the Canterbury Cathedral. Beginning at a London inn, the innkeeper proposes that during their journey each pilgrim tell two tales to help pass the time, and the best storyteller will be rewarded with a free supper on his return. Chaucer introduces us to a dynamic cast of characters that come from all corners of fourteenth century society, including a merchant, a prioress, a cook, a monk, a carpenter, a knight, a dyer, a clerk, a miller, and, of course, the wife in question. These characters highlight Chaucer's ability to speak in many different perspectives. The characters' tales range from being humorous, rude and naughty, to moral and reflective. Chaucer also made the controversial decision to write in English as opposed to French. French was the language spoken by elite aristocrats in the centuries following the Norman invasion, whereas English was the language of the common working-class people. This deliberate choice to write in the language of the masses, his history of writing about the working class, and his illustration of social commentary, prove his intent to challenge the status quo.

An illuminated Medieval manuscript in its simplest sense, "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale" showcases text supplemented with decoration such as borders, initials, and a miniature illustration. The bold use of varying colors provided multiple layers of dimension to the illumination. In quintessential Medieval manuscript style, the parchment showcases stylized curvilinear lines, consisting of abstract and natural ornamentation—such as the intertwining gems, vegetal floral patterns, and shell formations. While being decorative, the manuscript is not overly floral or "soft," featuring an abundant use of negative space. Its simplicity is not reminiscent of femininity, but rather masculinity. These sparsely decorated qualities of the manuscript are further demonstrated in the illustration on the right of the text: the Wife of Bath astride her horse, wearing regalia, brandishing a whip, and wearing spurs.

The Wife of Bath's riding position and her whip reinforce her dominance over her husbands and role-reversal in her marriages. Illustrations of the Prioress and the Second Nun in the same manuscript show the women riding side-saddle, while in contrast the Wife of Bath rides astride her horse (Figs. 2, 3). This choice of posture not only distinguishes the secular wife from her

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monastic counterparts but also demonstrates her control in marriage and life in general. Her whip further reinforces the notion of the Wife of Bath rejecting the Medieval way of life and bears strong resemblance to images of Phyllis dominating Aristotle, a popular Medieval tale (Fig. 4). The illustration of the Wife of Bath in the Ellesmere Chaucer declares her power and upper hand within marriage, that the wife describes having achieved in her own life and champions in her subsequent tale.

In her prologue, the wife entertains her fellow pilgrims with anecdotes of her five marriages and her domination over her husbands, or “maistrye” in Middle English (Poetry in Translation). The wife boastfully recounts how she acquired money, property, and marital power from her husbands through the calculated use of her wit and sexual charm. These stories along with her clothes illustrate her rare position of self-agency. Chaucer introduces the Wife of Bath as an attractive, well-traveled woman in the cloth business who displays her affluence and trade in the clothes she wears. In the image, the wife has gapped teeth, wide hips, and wears fine kerchiefs beneath a very wide brim hat. The wife’s fur-trimmed red tunic recalls her sensuous red stockings (mentioned in the prologue), and a golden belt that cinches her waist, which draws attention to both her wealth and the sensuality associated with her wide hips. A thick netted wimple—a cloth headdress covering the head, neck, and the sides of the face, formerly worn by women and still worn by some nuns—beneath a broad black hat reminds the viewer of her material success and the travels she undertakes as a result of her uncommon independence.

In “The Prologue of the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” the wife asserts her view that the morals of women are not merely that they all solely desire sovereignty, but that each individual woman should have the freedom to make her own decisions. This illuminated manuscript, supported by its story, contradicts many of the conventional customs of the time that forced women to quietly accept their subservient position. In her tale, The Wife of Bath states, “Well I know Abraham was a holy man, and Jacob as well, as far as I know, and each of them had more than two wives. And many other holy men did as well. When have you seen that in any time great God forbade marriage explicitly? Tell me, I Pray you” (Poetry). In other words, this quote addresses why society should not condemn her or any other woman who has wed multiple men throughout their life.

Both the story and art provide insight into the role of women in the Late Middle Ages, simultaneously enumerating and critiquing the long tradition of misogyny in Ancient and Medieval literature. The use of English, the depiction of the wife’s wealth through her clothing, and the sparsely decorated more masculine manuscript, all address the double standards for men and women that were common and deeply rooted in their culture. This manuscript posits that women should have the freedom to make their own decisions in marriage and in their lives.

## Works Cited

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