



## Condition of Women in *The Canterbury Tales*

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### Abstract

This paper describes the representation of women in *The Canterbury Tales*, the groups they form and their position in the medieval society of England. It also aims to depict the relationship between men and women and to demonstrate the roles in which women at that time appeared.

**Key Words:** Women, Prioress, Domestic, Societal Influence, Medieval.

### Introduction

Women from various periods of time portrayed varying degree of domestic and societal influence or standing. This notion may be glimpsed on fictional literature as well as verifiable studies conducted to better understand her story. For fiction, various factors also influence the presentation on the role of women that may depend in part by the narrator, the point of view, the characters, as well as the external influencing factors that include society in general during the period of which a certain tale may be depicted or lifted from.

This paper shall try to present the social and legal status of women during the period of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* using the manuscripts "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale". It will also examine both their social roles and the way those roles were perceived in their own day.

Since the host in *The Canterbury Tales* allowed each participant-narrator to provide his and her own story to tell, I would like to propose that the women narrators specifically the Prioress and the Wife of Bath (WB) have taken upon themselves an authority to choose a tale and narrate as they please with their own understanding of their rightful place in their own time, thus, each expressing a social standing and power as much as they would like their listener to understand and believe.

## Discussion

Sturges (1983) suggested that all three women narrators of *The Canterbury Tales* — the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun — share some common alliances unaware. This concern is with regards to the kinds of power and authority women might achieve or create through their prologue and tales. This is also seen not just a single authoritative female figure but comprising of a tradition of powerful women of authority. These are further invoked in order to attain for the narrator themselves this authority, and pass it on to their women audience (p 41).

### The Wife of Bath's Tale

Alysoun or Alys is the wife of Bath. She took Biblical lessons and preaching upon which to introduce herself as well as justify the reason why she married five times.

“Experience, though noon auctoritee  
 Were I ths world, is right ynough for me  
 To speke of wo that is in marriage:  
 For lordinges, sith I twelf yeer was of age,  
 Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve  
 (If I so ofte mygthe have y-wedded be)  
 All alle were worthy men in hir degree.” (Chaucer, p 102).

WB talked of her wedded affairs with honesty and fun, amusing her audience with her baring of soul among strangers. She also entertained the Pardoner's inquiry about an aged wife teaching younger men of lessons well-earned. At some point, she despised men, or those husbands who did not trust their wives.

Her tale is about a knight of King Arthur who raped a maiden. His punishment is of death, but the queen interceded and King Arthur left his fate on the queen's hand. The queen sought for the young man to tell her what women really want. The queen gave him a year and a day to search.

The knight searched near and far and learned a thing or two and opposing views until it was his time to answer the queen. He encountered an old woman on her way to a myriad of fair maidens and with one condition, the old woman gave him an answer. Before married, widowed and single women, the knight gave the queen an answer: that women wished for most to be in-charge of their husbands.

The old woman later stood and told the audience and the queen of her and the knight's mutual understanding. That she wished for nothing but the knight to become her husband. While the knight did not agree at first, he had no choice but stand by their agreement. He wedded her in secret and he was sad and tortured when they shared their bed.

The old woman challenged the knight of what he would choose: old and ugly but faithful wife, or young and beautiful wife who might and could cuckoo him for other men? The knight fully aware of his wife's wisdom, answered that he is leaving the decision on her that which she knew could make him happy. With that, the wife turned into a young, beautiful woman, who remained faithful to the knight who loved her so.

As noted by Sturges (1983), the WB is concerned of "earthly power in domestic situations [...] each woman narrator invests herself with power by invoking tradition of powerful women of the past" (p 43) such as that of the queen. Another invoked figure by the WB is the old woman who helped the knight.

"The solidarity of women in a temporal line is thus emphasized in each case, as is the potential alliance as women among these three narrators and other women," (Sturges, 1983, p 41). In fact, this alliance is strengthened in the tale with the gathering of women old, youth, married, single, widowed, and the queen during the time when the knight will need to provide for his answer on which women want most in life.

In comparing the three women in the tales that include the nun, Sturges (1983) noted how the men-narrators had women who were isolated from traditions: the Clerk's Griselda allowed his husband to torment her with cruel psychology while Virginia submitted to the will of his father and so does an absentee mother for her to be killed. Prudence in the Tale of Melibee also sought her husband's consent prior to voicing out her better opinion. "...all the women narrators, even the nuns, speak of heroines who refuse earthly submission," (p 42).

### **The Prioress's Tale**

Zatta (2009) suggested that there are underpinnings for the character of the Prioress. The Prioress during the time when the Canterbury Tales was written is believed to be a manager of her own abbot. During that time also, it was known that the Church had been hostile to the Jews not only due to its influence with Kings Henry II, John until Richard I when it comes to the royal treasury but also because Jews openly opposed the canons. Jews provided financial functions including collection of taxes and money helped control lands where feudal loyalty diminished. Aside from this, the Jews also practiced money-lending which Christians despised.

As Zatta (2009) noted, "Popular culture in the fourteenth century was thoroughly imbued with antisemitism, and popular literature, such as Miracles of the Virgin, or the stories of blood libel (the belief that Jews would kidnap, torture, and murder Christian children in the Passover season) portrayed Jews as agents of the devil, figures of almost supernatural malevolence, a superstition that was aided by the fact that no Jews lived in England (at least openly)."

Lynch (1942) observed the piety and devotion of the Prioress with the kind of stones she wore: the ruby assigned for July set for the devotion to the martyrdom of Jesus through the crucifixion, the emerald that preserved chastity, and the pearl associated to the Virgin for its whiteness or purity (pp 440-441).

The choice of invoking the Virgin for this tale was also due to the cult of Mary reaching its peak in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Zatta, 2009). The tale spoke of a seven-year old boy who sang a medieval Christian hymn “Alma Redemptoris Mater” or Nurturing Mother of the Redeemer merrily. This was set in an unnamed Asian city where a community of Jews abode. The boy’s mother is a widow. The boy did not understand the words of the song but a classmate told him it was about Mary. He sang it daily as we went to school. It happened that the way to his school passes through the community of the Jews. The Jews hired a goon to kill the child. Once murdered, the child was thrown away. When his mother found the body, he continued singing miraculously. When asked how, he replied that even when his neck is cut, the Virgin placed a grain on his tongue and that he will keep singing until it is removed.

Here, the Prioress invokes the divine powers of Mary, the mother of Jesus in a devout Christian manner appropriate of her time. It was in this time that miraculous tales of Mary were spread throughout the newly Christianized Europe and the tale was of ordinary regard to spread even in a sojourn like the Prioress. It is however proposed that while WB is subversive of the power of male, the Prioress asserted female authority as equal and coexisting with the male. These are not seen a misplacement in the late Middle Ages but a positioning that sought unity with their fellow women in a traditional context. The Prioress as a manager already is an authority of her own right, a profession and a career which was not easy to find at that time as afforded by opportunities at education, a chance to be in an organization and a responsibility at that (Sturges, 1983, p 42).

## Conclusion

As can be glimpsed by now with the insistence of WB about her domestic dominance over her husband(s) and her tale, as well as the Prioress rightful position in her society as manager of her abbot, invoking a deified Mary in her tale, there is an imminent place of authority in their person as well as their personal understanding.

It may be easily perceived that women during the Canterbury Tales or the late Middle Ages have a lower level among males in social and legal context, but the persons of WB and Prioress speak otherwise: one being who conquered five men as successive husbands in widowhood after the other, and another a manager with authority.

## Reference

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