

Portrayal of Strong Independent Women by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*

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Abstract

This paper explores how women are portrayed in *The Canterbury Tales*, examining their social roles, group dynamics, and positions within medieval English society. It also investigates the relationships between men and women during the period and highlights the distinct roles women occupied, as reflected in the tales.

Key Words: Women, Prioress, Social roles, Societal spheres, Medieval.

Introduction

Across historical periods, women have occupied varied roles within domestic and societal spheres. These shifting positions are reflected not only in historical records but also in fictional works. In literature, the portrayal of women is shaped by multiple factors, including narrative perspective, character voice, and broader socio-cultural contexts.

This paper analyzes the legal and social status of women during Geoffrey Chaucer's time through two tales from **The Canterbury Tales**: "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale." It will assess both the roles women held and how those roles were interpreted and expressed in the medieval era.

By allowing each pilgrim to tell their story, Chaucer gives voice to characters such as the Prioress and the Wife of Bath, who articulate their self-perceived positions and identities. These characters, through their narratives, exhibit individual interpretations of power, authority, and social belonging.

Discussion

According to Sturges (1983), all three female narrators in **The Canterbury Tales**—the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun—embody a shared theme: an exploration of female authority. These characters, though perhaps unaware of their mutual alignment, use their prologues and stories to assert control and establish a legacy of empowered womanhood (p. 41).

The Wife of Bath's Tale

The Wife of Bath, known as Alys or Alysoun, introduces herself with a personal justification for her five marriages, referencing scripture to legitimize her experiences:

"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).

Her frank discussion of marriage, sexuality, and autonomy adds a humorous yet bold commentary on gender roles. She even engages with the Pardoner in a light-hearted but firm exchange regarding her marital knowledge.

The tale she recounts centers on a knight from King Arthur’s court who assaults a young woman. Rather than immediate execution, the queen offers him a chance at redemption: he must discover what women most desire. After a long quest, he learns from an old woman that women seek sovereignty over their partners. In exchange for this answer, the knight agrees to marry her. Though reluctant, he honors the promise. When given a choice between an old, faithful wife and a young, potentially unfaithful one, he lets her decide—an act of surrendering control. Rewarding this gesture, she becomes both beautiful and faithful.

Sturges (1983) points out that the Wife of Bath’s story and persona challenge patriarchal norms by showcasing women who hold and wield power—especially in domestic relationships (p. 43). By invoking legendary female figures, the Wife of Bath reinforces a tradition of feminine authority and solidarity. This is highlighted in the scene where diverse women—young, old, single, married, and royal—gather during the knight’s trial.

In contrast, male narrators often depict submissive female characters, such as the Clerk’s Griselda or the Physician’s Virginia, who are dominated by male figures. Even the virtuous Prudence in the Tale of Melibee requires her husband’s permission to speak her mind. As Sturges concludes, only the women narrators present heroines who reject submissiveness (p. 42).

The Prioress’s Tale

Zatta (2009) delves into the cultural and ideological foundations of the Prioress’s character. Historically, a prioress would have overseen an abbey, granting her administrative responsibilities rarely afforded to women. At the same time, antisemitic sentiment was widespread in 14th-century England. The Jewish community—accused of heinous crimes like blood libel and seen as rivals in finance—had been expelled yet lingered in folklore and suspicion.

Zatta (2009) explains that antisemitism saturated medieval Christian literature, often depicting Jews as demonic villains. Stories like *Miracles of the Virgin* were common and featured tales of Jewish brutality juxtaposed with divine Christian forgiveness.

Lynch (1942) interprets the Prioress’s jewelry—ruby, emerald, and pearl—as symbolic of her religious devotion: the ruby represents Christ’s suffering, the emerald chastity, and the pearl purity (pp. 440–441).

In her tale, the Prioress narrates the martyrdom of a devout Christian boy who learns to sing “Alma Redemptoris Mater” in honor of Mary. As he routinely passes through a Jewish neighborhood, he is murdered. Miraculously, the boy continues to sing, revealing that the Virgin Mary placed a grain on his tongue. This tale underscores the Prioress’s spiritual devotion and her reliance on the popular Marian cult of the time.

While the Wife of Bath's tale subverts patriarchal authority, the Prioress asserts female power through religious piety and institutional status. Her reverence for Mary reflects her belief in divine feminine authority rather than earthly rebellion. As Sturges (1983) suggests, the Prioress, like her counterpart, represents a legitimate position of female influence—albeit one rooted in tradition and institutional frameworks (p. 42).

Conclusion

Through the contrasting personas of the Wife of Bath and the Prioress, Chaucer presents nuanced depictions of female power in a patriarchal society. While the Wife of Bath demands agency in personal and marital matters, the Prioress wields spiritual and managerial authority through her religious vocation.

Both characters defy the simplistic notion of female subordination. The Wife of Bath navigates her world through marriage and sexuality, asserting dominance and wisdom, while the Prioress stands as a figure of devout influence and societal respect.

Together, they illustrate that despite the legal and cultural limitations placed on women during the late Middle Ages, avenues for authority and self-expression remained available—often carved out by the women themselves.

Reference

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