

AP English Notes
October 12, 2004

We had quiz #9 today. Two quiz make ups were sent to schools.

We discussed the Wife of Bath today.

We looked at the concept of marriage in the Middle Ages. Bands were placed in the local church announcing the couples forthcoming marriage. Couples were married at the church door. (Royal and those of the upper class were wed inside the church.) At this time marriage was not considered a sacrament of the church.

Girls often became betrothed at ten and married between 12 and 15. Most often women (girls) married older men. A dowry was given in the marriage and the control of the dowry was in the husband's hands. Often a dowry was returned on the death of a husband or if the marriage was dissolved by the husband .

The Wife of Bath's description in the General Prologue is perhaps one of the best and most detailed that is given by Chaucer.

The audience learns of the Wife of Bath's physical appearance, her dress, her way of life and her character. A few of the important details include the Wife's deafness (668) and her "gat-tothed" or gap-toothed appearance (in Chaucer's age "gap teeth" was seen as a sign of sexual energy).

The Wife of Bath is not beautiful, but forceful and lively. Her clothes and head-dress are rather overdone but in keeping with her character. Her hat is as broad as a "bokeler" (a buckler or small shield). Her clothes are of good quality and her shoes are new leather which tells the observer that she has money.

Chaucer reveals that she has been married five times and has other company in her youth. This means, of course, that she has been five times widowed (no divorce for women in 14th century England); however, men could divorce a woman. That she has been widowed five times seems strange; yet, three husbands were very old and this seems to make sense.

The Wife of Bath enjoys going on pilgrimages which suggests a religious person; however, the real reasons for such travel are a love of adventure, and the chance for meeting new men. Most pilgrims are men (and the few other women present are nuns).

We also learn that she is versed in "remedies of love". Perhaps this means that she knows how to make a man love you, or it may mean "mischances" such as unwanted pregnancies or sexual dysfunction. (www.shunsley.eril.net/armoore/poetry/wifebath.htm#portrait)

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