

AP English Notes October 19, 2004

The descriptive major paper must be turned in to your facilitator tomorrow.

I will review for the major test for October 21 during class on October 20.

A major test on Beowulf, General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, and Wife of Bath's Prologue and Wife of Bath's Tale will be given during class time on October 21. In addition, a picture test on Canterbury Tales will be given during the first 25 minutes on Friday, October 22.

Wife of Bath Analysis from ClassicNotes, GradeSaver, by Nick Smith and Olivia Verma (editors).

The Wife of Bath begins the prologue to her tale by boasting of her experience in marriage. She has married five men already, and ignores the idea that this is a reproach to Christian principles. She is merely adhering to the Christian principle of "be fruitful and multiply." She cites the case of King Solomon, who had multiple wives, and tells the group that she welcomes the opportunity for her sixth husband. She also points out that Jesus never lays down a law about virginity.

The Pardoner objects to the Wife of Bath's musings on marriage, but she decides to tell about each of her husbands. Three were good and two were young men. The good ones were kind, rich and old. She would withhold sex from the old ones to get the riches they might offer her. She would use guilt and jealousy against them, along with other manipulative techniques.

Yet the fourth husband that she married was young. He was a reveler and had a mistress as well as a wife. He was a match for the Wife of Bath, sharing some of the similar qualities, but he soon died. The fifth husband was the most cruel to her, kind in bed but otherwise violent. He had been a student at Oxford, and came to be a boarder at the home of the Wife's best friend and godmother, Alison, while she was still married to husband number four. Soon after he died, she married Jankin, who was, at twenty, half the Wife's age. She gave him all of the property she owned, but he never let her have her way. Once he struck her so hard on the ear that she lost hearing simply because she tore a page from one of his books. He would cite examples from Roman history and the Bible that indicated a wife should be submissive, and it was one of these passages that she tore from the book. She complains that the stories in the Bible that denigrate women are written by monks who have no experience with them, and that the stories would be far different if women were to write them. After Jankin struck her, she appeared dead, but when she revived he was so penitent that he ceded all authority in the marriage to her. From that point onward she was kind to him, for he had given her what she truly wanted.

Analysis:

The Wife of Bath is perhaps the most fully realized character in the Canterbury Tales. Headstrong, boisterous and opinionated, she wages a perpetual struggle against the denigration of women and the taboos against female sexuality. She issues a number of rebuttals against strict religious claims for chastity and monogamy, using Biblical examples including Solomon to show that the Bible does not overtly condemn all expressions of sexuality. Those who use religious texts to argue for the submission of women are the most fervent targets of scorn for the Wife of Bath. She claims that the reason for the bias against women in these texts is due to the lack of experience and contact with women of those who write the text. It is this antipathy to intellectual arguments against femininity that causes her to tear the pages from Jankin's book.

The Wife of Bath's crusade to prove the worth of women does open the prologue to modern

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interpretations that reconfigure the Wife of Bath as a feminist icon, but she is no unabashed modern heroine. She is overtly manipulative, using her sexuality as a weapon against her husbands in order to shame them into providing for her. She can be a harridan and a harpy, cruelly accusing her husbands of ingratitude and withholding sex to extract gifts from her husbands. Yet in the Wife's boasts of these strategies, she indicates that they were a necessity; she has been afforded so few benefits that she must use her sexuality, the one great weapon that she has, to gain a dominance over her husbands. Within her posturing there is also the indication that the Wife of Bath is in a very precarious situation. She uses her intensity to mask the fact that, as an aging woman who is rapidly losing her appearance—the one asset that she can use—the Wife of Bath is in danger of losing her place in society.

The Wife of Bath uses a language of commerce throughout her tale in reference to marriage. While this could be conceived of as a comparison of marriage to prostitution, it better refers to her conception of the marriage 'debt.' The Wife of Bath's manipulations can be seen as an economic shrewdness. She recognizes marriage for what it is and brings that quality to the fore. Her perceptive nature extends even to herself; she recognizes what sins she may have committed and the social norms she has transgressed, but this quality is most important for allowing her to realize what marriage truly entails for her.

The theme of the Wife of Bath's Tale is thus not female equality in marriage, but rather the power struggles between the husband and wife. She does not seek an equal partnership with a husband, but a situation in which she has control over her spouse. The Wife of Bath even indicates that it is only in a marriage where the wife has control over her husband that true happiness can be attained. When Jankin attempted to exert control over her and struck her down, she reasserted her control over him through guilt. This shift of the balance of power led to her first truly happy domestic arrangement. Since she was the dominant partner in the marriage, the Wife of Bath no longer saw it necessary to struggle with her husband or withhold sexual favors from him. According to the Wife of Bath, even her husband was more satisfied with this arrangement, although considering her previous boasts one must consider the extremely biased point of view that she gives.

The Wife of Bath's Tale:

The Wife of Bath's Tale tells a story from a distant time, when King Arthur ruled the nation and fairy queens and elves were common. However, now friars are common where elves once were. King Arthur had a knight who, when riding home one day from hawking, found a maiden walking alone and raped her. This crime usually held the penalty of death, but the queen intervened and begged her husband to spare the knight. She told the knight that she would grant his life if he could answer the question "what do women most desire?" She gave him one year to find the answer. The knight went on his journey and could find no satisfactory answer. Some said wealth, others jollity, some status, others a good lover in bed. The knight was despondent that he could not find an answer. When he reached the end of the twelve months before he must return to meet his fate, he found an old woman and asked her the question. She agreed to give the answer and assured him that it was the right one, but would only tell him the answer if he would marry her. She told him that women desire to have the sovereignty and to rule over their husbands. When the knight faced the queen and gave the correct answer, the old woman announced the knight's pledge, which constrained him to wed. The knight, although pardoned, was miserable that he had to marry such an old crone. She realized his unhappiness, and confronted him about it. He criticized her for not only being old and ugly, but low-born. She scoffs at his snobbery as a definition of a 'gentleman' and defends her poverty as irrelevant to God. She gives him a choice: he can have her as a wife old and ugly, but humble and devoted, or young and fair, but independent. He chooses to give her independence. When he kisses her, she transforms into a young and beautiful woman. They lived happily together; he

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was devoted to her, while she tended to his pleasure. The Wife of Bath ends the Tale with its moral: let Christ grant all women submissive husbands who sexually satisfy their wives.

Analysis:

The Wife of Bath's Tale centers around feminine issues, posing the question "what do women want most?" and ending with the moral that wives deserve kind and devoted husbands who will cede dominance in a marriage to them. The hand of the Wife of Bath is thus omnipresent in the tale as is no other narrator. The old crone voices the opinions that the Wife of Bath herself gave during her extended prologue before the story, and can be seen as a veiled representation of the Wife of Bath. Like the Wife of Bath in her struggle with Jankin, the old woman marries a younger man, and the two only find happiness when the young husband cedes control to the older wife. The personalities of the Wife of Bath and the old woman of the story are even identical; the old woman is prone to argumentative speeches, such as her defense of poverty and low status, similar to the Wife of Bath's defense of female sexuality in the prologue. The old woman even has rhetoric skills perhaps greater than the Wife of Bath. Her tirade against the knight defending her supposed faults uses nearly impregnable logic. The story even represents a scenario of wish-fulfillment for the Wife of Bath, for the old woman suddenly transforms herself into a young and beautiful woman at the story's end. It is a fairy-tale transformation story in which a kiss turns a hideous creature into a princess.

However, some of the dynamics of the story are problematic. The tale has a fairy-tale structure, but offers discordant elements. The nominal hero of the tale is a rapist. Even after the old woman saves him from execution, he behaves coldly and dismissive toward her. He seems hardly worth of the woman, even in her most aged and haggard form. Still, this opens up the knight for his own transformation. He chooses to cede to the woman sovereignty in marriage and it is when he does this that she becomes young and beautiful. The tale poses her newfound beauty as an incidental effect of her independence, a physical manifestation of her internal qualities.

The final 'moral' of the tale is comic but disturbing. It fully reflects the Wife of Bath's sensibility of exaggerated aggressiveness. The ending makes an ambiguous statement. The wife who has full sovereignty, but still she obeyed him in everything to his liking. This may indicate that she was sexually obliging once she received the sovereignty she wanted, a more comic notion, or may indicate that the gift of sovereignty instituted a state in which there could finally be some mutual interaction impossible when the husband asserts dominion over the wife.