Chaucer’s Portrayal of the Wife of Bath

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Introduction:

The Wife shares information regarding her life experiences in a prologue before she narrates her story. Starting off with a lengthy foreword, the Wife of Bath proclaims that she has always followed the law of experience rather than that of a specialist. Possessing 5 husbands makes her think she has enough experience to make herself skilled. According to her, there’s nothing erroneous with possessing 5 husbands, and she cannot comprehend Jesus’ reproach to the woman having 5 husbands at the well. She prefers the biblical law instead, which is to move forward and reproduce.

Wife’s defense against her act:

The Wife mentions King Solomon, who possessed multiple mates, and St. Paul’s reprimand that it’s superior to espouse than to burn in order to defend her situation. She defies anyone to indicate to her that God instructed virginity by showing their Bible knowledge. Also, she believes that sexual organs are present both for practical purposes and for pleasure. And contrary to many taciturn women, she has always been eager to have sex whenever her man desires it.

Stories of Wife’s husband:

After that, the Wife of Bath shares stories about her previous husbands and discloses how she could achieve dominance over them. Tactlessly, one of her partners gives up on his life when she obtains total control over him. Then she clarifies how she extended control over her 5th husband.

The fifth husband:

After the death of her fourth husband, she got interested in a young clerk named Jankyn. They got married even though she was twice as old as he was. Right after the honeymoon ended, she found out that Jankyn was always busy reading, particularly those records that mocked women. One night, he started reading noticeably about all the prostitutes, disloyal women, murderers, etc. Without being able to endure it, the Wife of Bath took the manuscript and hit Jankyn, who then hit her in revenge.

She pretended to die. As a result, he assured her of anything if she would come back to life. This is how she achieved full authority over her 5th husband. Since that day, she has remained true to her husband.

Analysis:

The Wife's introduction is exclusive because it is longer than the story itself. The story's preamble explains the foundation of her concepts about familiarity versus power and presents the argument that she demonstrates in her story: The most desired thing for women is absolute authority over their partners. Having 5 companions, the Wife senses that she can express power from this capability, and, in the preface, she says how she achieved sovereignty over each of them ("Canterbury Tales", source 2).

Anti-feminism in Chaucer's time:

The antifeminism of the church was a strong regulatory feature. Since women were often considered almost beasts, they were not permitted to contribute to church principles in any way. They were known to be sexually greedy, shrewish, and lustful. Similarly, in Chaucer's time, polygamy was considered doubtful. Hence, to clarify her position, the Wife of Bath sensibly analyses the verses of God as exposed in scripture. What she acquires from the scripture tells her that she is not merely an empty-minded woman (Chaucer: The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale — An Interlinear Translation).

The idea of virginity:

Moreover, in Chaucer's period, everlasting virginity received significant admiration; some of the saints were sanctified because they favored death over the loss of their virginity, or some resisted so aggressively to preserve their virginity that they were known to be martyrs and were blessed.

Common sense:

Apart from the Holy Scriptures, she appeals to common sense and says that if everyone stayed a virgin, who would remain to deliver more virgins? Basically, she maintains that sex is for desire as well as for reproduction. She confesses that she is a lively woman who relishes sex and is not embarrassed by it, which violates the primitive perspective that sex is just for reproduction. She also contradicts the prevalent faith that women should be obedient, particularly in sexual matters.

Wife’s opinions:

In all the circumstances, the Wife’s opinions are in contradiction with the authorities of the church, and she favors her own understanding of academic influences. The truly extraordinary feature of the Wife of Bath’s preamble is not her dispute with the traditions of her phase or the church’s criticisms, but the very magnificent representation of a human being. She is a woman of great energy who is brilliantly thriving and receptive. Even after five marriages and difficulties, losing her attractiveness and youth did not stop her from enjoying her remaining life with full zest.

Conclusion:

All the way through the story, customary standards, leadership, and supremacy are inverted or conquered. At the beginning of the story, King Arthur succumbs to the law of Guinevere, deserting both his authority over the municipality and his leadership of the family; the women of the court, instead of the men, function as dispensers of justice; and the power of scriptures and volumes leads to understanding. In addition, the knight, who raped and dishonored the holiness of a young girl, is exchanged by another female, albeit a hag. In the end, the choice of the hag makes the knight find it unbearable. But when he lets her make the judgment, he has relinquished the male’s dominion in favor of the female’s rule, thus changing the primitive picture of the world completely (“Canterbury Tales”, source 1).

Works Cited

“The Canterbury Tales.” SparkNotes, SparkNotes, www.sparknotes.com/lit/canterbury/section8/.

“The Canterbury Tales.” The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/c/the-canterbury-tales/summary-and-analysis/the-wife-of-baths-prologue-and-tale.

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