

The Women of *The Canterbury Tales*: Pioneers of Their Time

The Middle Ages is generally characterized by rough manners, women under the harsh control of men and not having any roles outside their family, little noteworthy literature, dirty streets and not much law and order. The Middle Ages, often called the “Dark Ages”, is fixed in today’s perception as a backward and rough time, in which there was little cultivation. Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, however, gives a completely different picture of this time period. With his witty and accurate portrayals of different characters, and his insightful perception on humanity his writings contain ideas that are before his time and that only came to fruition centuries after he put them on paper. Chaucer, through his bold female characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, presents a picture of women that goes against the norms of his time, and shows that in the Middle Ages one of the few realms within which women saw an opportunity to assert themselves, in an otherwise male dominated society, was in their own home and family.

The roles of women in the Middle Ages differed greatly based on their birth. The average woman in the Middle Ages would take care of the home front, raising her children and doing the housework, but would also be expected to work to help support the family. Women in rural areas would work the land, or if they lived in the city would most often be servants in aristocrats’ homes or would sew clothes. They were excluded, however from doing any kind of “skilled work” (Trueman). Even for the jobs available to them, they received substantially less than men did for the same work. For hay making, for example, men were paid six pence for a day’s work, while women were only given four (Trueman). Rich aristocratic women, however, naturally neither had to raise their children and had servants to help out round the house (Trueman). They too, however, were greatly limited, as their marriage was often a “political gesture” or arranged because it was “an advantage to the girl’s family”, (Trueman) and because the “common law emphasized the husband’s control over the wife and her property” (Rubin 255). Despite these formal restrictions in public life, though, women had much more power than they appeared to have on the surface.

Women in the Middle Ages, contrary to popular belief, were very influential in society at large in the day-to-day life. Although they played no role in the running of the country (Trueman), such as being a politician, they were vital in many other aspects of medieval life. The image of women, which was them being “scatty, chatty, unreliable and frivolous” (Rubin

256) and subordinated to men, stands in stark contrast to the realities of the time. In actual fact, “women’s work was crucial at every level of production” (Rubin 256) and men and women would “work side by side” (Rubin 61). This is illustrated in how women could be “involved in training apprentices”, in being the “vendor at the street-facing frontage of workshops” (Rubin 61) or in several other tasks in their husband’s business (Rubin 61).

Based on how women were seen in society, the queen of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is all the more remarkable. The queen, not the king, plays a central role in the fate of the sinful knight, who is sentenced to death. The queen and the ladies of the court manage to bring the king around, and he gives the whole affair to the queen to deal with. This is unusual and bold of Chaucer, as men were the leaders of society who made the influential decisions, while women were assigned the supporting role. Joan of Arc is the perfect example, as she shows “the perilous position inhabited by women who ... entered into public spaces without the support of male kin” (Rubin 228). She, as a woman in a leadership position, was frowned upon by the English and later burnt to death, as she was believed to be a witch. The queen, however, in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is given a free hand in the punishment of a criminal. She then presides over the case of the knight with aplomb, not deciding his fate immediately, but setting him a challenge. Additionally, she has not only been given this unusual role to play, which would normally be the king’s duty, but is in this situation undeniably above the knight, holding his life in her hands with him at her mercy, which would also be scandalous in the male dominated society of the Middle Ages.

The Hag also would have posed quite a problem to the men of the time. As the knight seeks the answer to the question of “what is the thing that women most desire” (Chaucer 307), the cliché answers of the time are the ones he finds first, that fit into the stereotype of the women of the Middle Ages. Some of the opinions were that women “wanted wealth” or “flattery” or “attentiveness” (Chaucer 307) from men. The correct answer to the question, however, which the knight has great difficulty finding, is that women want to be “set in mastery above” (Chaucer 310) their husbands. This is completely opposite to how women were perceived at the time, as was illustrated above. They were thought of being below men, and them even thinking of being able to control their husbands was unheard of. Even the common law enforced this authority of men (Rubin 255).

The Hag also demonstrates techniques of logical reasoning, as she proves her worth to the knight after the knight is dismissive and unkind to her. She gives a logical argument, for example, on how nobility is not inherited from one’s parents, but that it is rather something each person must cultivate for themselves or is also mentioned to be a gift from God. This is

also revolutionary, as women were even degraded in art (Rubin 256)¹. All these point to a general assumption that women were not capable of serious intellectual activity, which is in stark contrast to the Hag. She not only quotes Dante and mentions other authors such as Boethius (showing that she is educated), but proceeds to demonstrate that she can also use them in a logical argumentation. The Wife of Bath tells this tale and so this also demonstrates her being well-read, something to which “literary critics turn with enthusiasm ... as a rare instance of woman as ... reader” (Hansen 1).

The theme of women’s sovereignty over men comes up again in “The Franklin’s Tale”, giving a concrete example of what this would look like. Dorigen does not make her decision to marry Arveragus until at last after the knight’s “many a toilsome enterprise and quest ... she saw his worthiness and felt such pity for the pains he suffered, especially for the meek obedience offered, that privately she fell into accord” (Chaucer 433). This exhibits the Wife of Bath’s point of women enjoying having the upper hand over men. Then Chaucer goes on to illustrate the happy marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, that was in great part due to Arveragus surrendering some of what traditionally comes with the role of being a husband in the Middle Ages, and giving Dorigen in a certain aspect dominance in their marriage. This is seen in how Arveragus “freely gave his promise as a knight that he would never darken her delight by exercising his authority against her will ..., but would obey in all with simple trust” (Chaucer 433). The point made by the Hag in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is taken to a new level, as this is said to have been done “to enhance the bliss of both their lives” (Chaucer 433).

It is important to note, however, that the Hag in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” also demonstrates the case of women wanting “mastery above” (Chaucer 310) their husbands, but mostly in a more underhand way. The Hag is “a powerful artist, able to ... gain mastery over her husband through her wise and “gentil” ...speech” (Hansen 7). The knight at first insults her and says that she is “old and so abominably plain”, “so low” and “so low-bred” (Chaucer 312), but by the end of her speech (in which she uses the previously mentioned logical reasoning), he calls her “my lady and my love, my dearest wife” (Chaucer 315). Though she gains her “mastery” (Chaucer 310) over her husband in an unobvious way, it is also stated clearly at the end. The knight agrees that she has “won the mastery” and that she can “choose and rule” as she likes (Chaucer 315).

¹For example there is a painting in Broughton of women talking among themselves in church (Rubin 288). As mentioned earlier, women were excluded from “skilled work” (Trueman) and were thought to be “frivolous” (Rubin 256).

Arveragus and Dorigen, from “The Franklin’s Tale”, in their marriage do not conform to the roles apportioned to them according to the value system of the Middle Ages, but rather have a modern relationship that is rooted in the principles that most marriages are founded on today. The first aspect in which their relationship is unconventional, is that their match is not arranged by their families. Usually fathers would choose a suitable match for their children, which would be beneficial to their family, as opposed to letting the children choose who they liked (Trueman). Dorigen has to be won by Arveragus and this proves to be no easy task. His worth and persistence, however, win Dorigen over.

The relationship of Arveragus and Dorigen is set in stark contrast to the relationship Dorigen has with Aurelius, whom she has known for a long time. He is described as “the handsomest man alive” and said to have “sang and danced better than any man there is or has been since the world began” (Chaucer 438). Aurelius is described with superlatives, while Arveragus is presented as a more timid, shy man, who at first does not attract one’s attention, but who one discovers at further acquaintance to have valuable qualities. On the face of it, Aurelius should have been the one Dorigen was attracted to, yet she never thought of him that way. This shows that Dorigen was only willing to enter into marriage with someone who she could truly respect and love. This is exhibited in how with Arveragus the turning point in her accepting him to be her husband is her finally noticing “his worthiness” (Chaucer 433). Arveragus also goes into his married life with a friend as his companion, who is “both his lady and his love” (Chaucer 435). Arveragus and Dorigen marrying out of love, instead of convenience is a rare and bold move for the times they are from. These are rather the principles of the modern age.

Furthermore, Dorigen and Arveragus have a “marriage built on equality” (Hardison). Chaucer writes that “love is a thing as any spirit free; women by nature long for liberty and not to be constrained or made a thrall, and so do men” (434), by this showing that neither half in a marriage should be subjected to the other. Arveragus promises Dorigen that he will not be “exercising his authority against her will” (Chaucer 433), which shows that they both have a voice in their relationship. This went completely against the principle of the man’s authority in the Middle Ages, so it is added in the text that “save that his sovereignty [of Arveragus] in name upon her he should preserve, lest it should shame his honour” (Chaucer 433). The equality in their relationship is practically groundbreaking, as not only were women not considered equal to their husbands in a marriage, but men could also get away with “violence within marital relations”(Rubin 254), which was a common occurrence in the Middle Ages (Rubin 254).

Additionally, the modern principle of a lasting relationship needing work on both sides appears, too. The text observes that “if they [Arveragus and Dorigen] would long keep company”, the “lovers must each be ready to obey the other” (Chaucer 434). Dorigen and Arveragus make equal efforts in their relationship to ensure that it is a happy one. When Arveragus establishes at the beginning of their relationship that “he would never darken her delight by exercising his authority against her will or showing jealousy, but would obey in all with simple trust” (Chaucer 433), Dorigen does not just sit back and enjoy her new power, but makes an effort herself and intends to be his “true and humble wife” (Chaucer 434). After this Chaucer writes that they “were both in quiet and at rest” (434), indicating the contentedness that both of them derive from such an arrangement.

The husband-wife relationships in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and “The Franklin’s Tale” show that for the women of the Middle Ages the realm in which they could gain some independence in a society monopolized by men, was within the sphere of their home and family. To begin with, in the previously mentioned two tales, there are several instances in which women use the opportunity provided within their marriage to gain a bit of control of their own fate, or the fate of those around them. Such an instance is when the queen in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” manages to convince the king with the ladies of the court that he should hand over the case of the sinful knight to her. This shows that although women could not exercise authority on their own, with a man by their side this was very much possible.

A further opportunity for autonomy for women within their home was the case of widowhood. At the end of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, the speaker’s outspoken lines show this, saying that Jesus should bless them women with the “grace to overbid them [their husbands] when we wed” (Chaucer 316). This is a declaration that should not surprise the readers of this tale, considering the situation of widows in the Middle Ages. Among aristocrats, when a woman’s husband died she received considerable power, as she gained authority over many of the aspects of her family’s life and livelihood. Women, once widowed, “as heads of households ... had to hire and fire and plan agricultural routines with family members and hired hands” (Rubin 256). There is even a recorded instance of four widows from Sussex taking part in the annual pig fair with their herds (Rubin 256), which demonstrates considerable independence. This explains why the speaker at the end of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” was hoping to live longer than her husband, as it would give her the freedom she as a woman never got before her marriage and only partially got during it.

Is the “Dark Ages” really an apt description of the Middle Ages? Was it really full of dirt, male tyranny and lack of accomplishment? Geoffrey Chaucer, if nothing else, is a proof

against this false and stereotypical view. In his acclaimed work, *The Canterbury Tales*, he presents female characters such as Dorigen, the Hag and the queen, who are daring and bold enough to go against the grain of the norms of their society. Chaucer shows great perception of not only his own society, but mankind in general too. He shows the loopholes of his time, through which the women of the Middle Ages could gain some freedom. He also, however, writes about concepts and ideas that are far ahead of his time that would only become contentious issues centuries later. The “Dark Ages” seems rather to be an era foreshadowing things to come.

Works Cited

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