

The Prioress and the Wife of Bath in *Canterbury Tales*:  
A Comparison

Assignment 1  
ENGL2111  
Mark Morrison  
April 20, 2013  
T00056030

The Prioress and Wife of Bath from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* represent two very different sorts of class strata within the context of medieval England. Both of these women display signs of conformity and non-conformity within their respective descriptions that allow the reader to fully comprehend the complexities of England's social strata.

The Prioress is described as having a smile which is "ful symple and coy," which provides an excellent start-off point for an analysis of her character.<sup>1</sup> She only swears by 'St. Loy' which means that she is a character that hardly swears at all. She sings the divine service "Ful weel" with a pleasant nasal intonation and "frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly."<sup>2</sup> She strives to imitate courtly manners, something that is evident in her precise table manners where she even takes care not to wet her fingers too deeply in sauce, and does her best to speak French, though her understanding of Parisian French is "to hire unknowe."<sup>3</sup> Her emotions are fraught with pity at the sight of dead or bleeding mice caught in a trap, and she is fond of animals and feeds her three dogs with roasted meat and expensive fine bread. Chaucer criticizes the Prioress by praising her faults. For example, the Prioress's kindness to her pet dogs is seen as a weakness, and her charity should extend towards needy people rather than animals. Indeed, in medieval times animals were not thought to possess souls, and were "outside the scheme of salvation."<sup>4</sup> She is obviously a lady who has not forgotten her past of extravagance and fine living, being a member of the second estate in medieval English society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Line 119.

<sup>2</sup> Lines 122-124

<sup>3</sup> Line 126.

<sup>4</sup> "Free Study Guide for the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer," TheBestNotes.com, Accessed April 2, 2013, [http://thebestnotes.com/booknotes/Canterbury\\_Tales/Canterbury\\_Tales36.html](http://thebestnotes.com/booknotes/Canterbury_Tales/Canterbury_Tales36.html).

In comparison, the Wife of Bath is worldly in both senses of the word: she has seen the world and has experience in the ways of the world, that is, in love and sex. She is a member of the up and coming bourgeois class of citizen that Chaucer himself belonged to, which further muddied the lines between the accepted three estates of medieval society. Although she is argumentative and enjoys talking, the Wife is intelligent in a common sense, rather than intellectual, way. She often goes on pilgrimages, but not for the sake of religion. Instead, she goes because she believes that every place must be seen. Her clothes, physical features and references to her past are commented on by Chaucer, which causes the reader to wonder how well she fits the rules imposed by Christian authorities regarding womanly behaviour, because women at this time were categorized as either saints or sinners by their actions.<sup>5</sup> There were two women who represented the sinner or the saint. Eve supposedly caused the downfall of all men whereas the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, symbolized purity, and the wife comprises elements of both in her personality.

The Prioress dresses in an extremely elegant manner, very well-maintained and wearing the best sort of clothing--especially considering her obvious past extravagance and fine living. She is elegantly dressed in a fine cloak and her wimple is neatly pleated. She also wears a lot of jewellery, possessing a red-coral rosary and an elegant gold brooch that quotes Virgil, saying "Amor vincit Omnia" or "Love Conquers All."<sup>6</sup> For Chaucer, the Prioress is symbolic of the ideals of beauty. It is obvious from her mode of dress that the Prioress is a worldly being who values her looks over most anything else.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Character Analysis," The Historical Perception of the Wife of Bath, Accessed April 1, 2013, <http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/projf983a/charac.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "Amor Vincent Omnia," Merriam-Webster, Accessed April 2, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amor%20vincit%20omnia>.

Keeping her ecclesiastical background in mind the inscription should rather have been ‘Amor Dei’ (i.e. concerned with divine love instead of worldly profane love). As a nun she should strictly follow the rules of simplicity and poverty. According to F.N Robinson in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Murial Bowden in *A Commentary on the General Prologue*, and John Matthews Manly in *Some New Light on Chaucer*, we can in fact discern that the prioress is of aristocratic lineage, and would not be accustomed to any sort of rough living, and is in fact criticized for her dress style by Chaucer.<sup>7</sup>

The Wife of Bath is dressed in a completely rich and tasteful manner. In fact, her clothes are rather extravagant, with her head is covered in a heavy, high-quality cloth, her stockings are a deep scarlet color, and the leather on her shoes is well-made, soft, and brand new. She shows off her Sunday clothes with evident pride, wearing ten pounds of cloth, woven by herself under her hat. Her clothing symbolizes to the reader that she is not timid or shy and also shows off her expertise as a weaver. All of these pieces of clothing on the wife demonstrate just how wealthy she really is. At the time that *The Canterbury Tales* was written, scarlet was an especially costly dye, since it was made from individual red beetles found only in hard-to-reach areas of the world. Furthermore, the fact that the wife hails from the town of Bath, which was a major English cloth-making town throughout the Middle Ages, is reflected in both her talent as a seamstress and her stylish garments. Bath was also engaged in an economic competition at this time for a place among the great European exporters of cloth, which were almost entirely located in the Netherlands and Belgium.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the fact that the Wife’s sewing surpasses

---

<sup>7</sup> Charles Moorman, "The Prioress as Pearly Queen," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer 1978), 26.

<sup>8</sup> "Analysis of Major Characters," SparksNotes, Accessed April 3, 2013, <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/canterbury/canalysis.html>.

that of the cloth makers of “Ipres and of Gaunt” --the Belgian cities of Ypres and Ghent-- speaks well of Bath’s (and England's to an extent) attempt to outdo its overseas competitors. The Wife of Bath can be seen as a proud woman of her era who is very open and brash about herself in a manner unlike those of her time.

## Bibliography

"Amor Vincent Omnia," Merriam-Webster, Accessed April 2, 2013,  
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amor%20vincit%20omnia>.

"Analysis of Major Characters," SparksNotes, Accessed April 3, 2013,  
<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/canterbury/canalysis.html>.

"Character Analysis," The Historical Perception of the Wife of Bath, Accessed April 1, 2013, <http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/projf983a/charac.htm>.

"Free Study Guide for the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer," TheBestNotes.com, Accessed April 2, 2013,  
[http://thebestnotes.com/booknotes/Canterbury\\_Tales/Canterbury\\_Tales36.html](http://thebestnotes.com/booknotes/Canterbury_Tales/Canterbury_Tales36.html).

Greenblatt, Stephen, Ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume A*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Moorman, Charles. "The Prioress as Pearly Queen." *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer 1978), pp. 25-33.

"The Prologue Summary and Analysis," Cliffs Notes, Accessed April 3, 2013,  
[http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study\\_guide/literature/canterbury-tales/summary-analysis/prologue.html](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/canterbury-tales/summary-analysis/prologue.html).