Role Of Women In Canterbury Tales- Essay, Research Paper

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The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer serves as a moral

manual for the 1300 s and years after. Through the faults of both men

and woman, he shows in each persons story what is right and wrong and

how one should live. Under the surface, however, lies a jaded look

and woman and how they cause for the downfall of men.

The Knight s Tale is one of chivalry and upstanding moral

behavior. However, beneath the surface lies the theme of the evil

nature of women. Emily plays the part of the beautiful woman who

captivates the hearts of two unsuspecting men. Those two men are

cousins Arcite and Palamon, both knights who duel for Emily s hand in

marriage. The two start out as the best of friends and then roommates

in a jail cell that is to be shared for eternity. But with one look

at Emily, the two start bickering instinctively and almost come to

blows over something they will never be able to have, or so it seems.

Chaucer s knack for irony revels itself as Arcite is released from his

life sentence but disallowed from ever coming back to Athens. He

would be killed ever caught within the city again by King Theseus.

Because Arcite is doomed to never again see Emily, his broken heart

causes him sickness as he s weakened by love. It is only after he

comes up with the plan of returning to Athens under an assumed name

that he starts to get better. Meanwhile, Palamon remains back in

captivity, rendered helpless due to his lifelong punishment in prison.

He knows that he will never be able to talk to Emily and certainly

not marry her because of his plight. All he can do is watch her from

a distance and admire her beauty. Arcite believes that this is a

better punishment than his, though, as he says:

O dere cosin Palamon, quod he,

Thyn is the victorie of this aventure

Ful blisfully in prison maistow dure;

In prison? Certes nay, but in paradys!

Wel hath fortuen y-turned thee the dys,

That hast the sighte of hir, and I th adsence.

But I, that am exyled and bareyne

Of alle grace, and in so greet despeir,

That ther nis erthe, water, fyr, ne eir,

Ne creature, that of hem maked is,

That may me helpe or doon confort in this:

Wel oughte I sterve in wanhope and distresse;

Farwel my lyf, my lust, and my gladnesse! (58 and 60)

Emily has caused him such distress that he cries all the time and

contemplates killing himself so he won t have to feel this every day

pain that appears to have no end. All of this because of a woman.

Emily is a sweet, innocent woman of her times. In a strange

twist for a woman of The Canterbury Tales, she is perfectly happy

alone and doesn t ever want to be married. Yet, Palamon and Arcite

duel twice for Emily s love and Arcite ends up losing his life all

because of her. Palamon, winning her by default, serves Emily

faithfully for several years before she agrees to marry him, still not

loving him, though. No one wins in The Knight s Tale, but it is the

two men who fight over the woman who lose the most.

The Nun s Priest s Tale is perhaps the best representation

of men s downfall due to the influence of women. The story revolves

around a rooster, Chauntercleer, the most beautiful cock in all of

England with the sweetest voice an any ear has heard. He has seven

wives but his favorite was Pertelote, an elegant hen in her own right.

It is this woman, this female, that causes Chauntercleer great

trouble.

One night Chauntercleer wakes suddenly from a bad dream.

Seemingly seeking comfort in her, he tells Pertelot about the dream

which involves a wild, rampant dog with beady eyes coming after

Chauntercleer. But instead of consoling her husband , she

challenges his manhood and says that no man hers should be scared of a

dream. This causes Chauntercleer to go off on a tangent about the

many, many times in history dreams have predicted the future and how

non-believers suffered the consciences of not taking the proper

precautions. After he done, however, he says that Pertelot is

probably right and goes off about his day not giving it another

thought. This causes the narrator to take an aside from the

story to tell us his own opinion on women but says that it is the

belief of many men and not his own in an attempt to perhaps cover

himself. In this he says:

Wommennes counseils been ful ofte colde;

Wommannes counseil broughte us first to wo,

And made Adam fro paradys to go,

Theras he was ful mery, and wel at ese.

But for I noot to whom it mighte displese

If I counseil of wommen wolde blame,

Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.

Rede auctours, wher they trete of swich matere,

And what they seyn of wommen ye may here.

Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;

I can noon harm of no womman divyne. (404)

Chauntecleer later is indeed attacked by a wolf and carried

away to the woods to his certain doom before slipping away, proving

the point that women are the downfall of men. If he had listened to

himself and his dreams instead of Pertelote, Chauntecleer would have

been more cautious of not of had the near-death encounter he did.

Finally, the prologue to the Wife Of Bath s Tale shows the

reader another type of woman of the time, this time in the effect of

the story teller. The Wife Of Bath is a tough woman with a mind of

her own and she s not afraid to speak it. She intimidates men and

woman alike due to the strength she possesses. But instead of showing

this as a good characteristic, Chaucer makes her toothless and

ugly. She has also had five different husbands and countless affairs,

thus breaking innocent men s hearts.

In one part of the prologue, the Wife Of Bath speaks of

marriage and women from a man s point of view:

Thou lykenest wommanes love to helle,

To bareyne lond, ther water may not dwelle.

Thou lyknest is also to wilde fyr:

The more it brenneth, the more it hath desyr

To consume every thing that brent wol be.

Thous seyst right as wormes shende a tree,

Right so a wyf destroyeth hir housebonde;

This knowe they that been to wyves bonde. (198)

The Wife Of Bath brings up many a valid point throughout the prologue

but Chaucer voids her opinion because of her social class and looks,

when in truth she is very wise. It is as if her intelligence is

overshadowed by the fact that has had five husbands and considered

something of a whore.

It is not only in three narration s that women are thought of

as having an evil-like quality, that they always tempt and take from

men, but in almost every one of the stories. They are depicted of

untrustworthy, selfish and very vain throughout the collection of

tales. Chaucer obviously has very opinionated views of the marriage

and the opposite sex and expresses it very strongly in The

Canterbury Tales.