The Canterbury Tales Essay, Research Paper

One important aspect of society that Geoffrey Chaucer includes in a series of his short tales, The Canterbury Tales , is the role of women in the 14th century. Two of the stories, which include this aspect, are The Knight s Tale and The Wife of Bath s Tale. Chaucer shows two views of women that existed at that time period in England. One view is portrayed through Emily and the other view is portrayed through the Wife of Bath s Tale and the old woman in her tale. The view portrayed by Emily shows her as a pretty maiden who minds her own business while two cousin s fight over their love for her. Although the story is based on her in a way of speaking, she is not the main heroine in the story. On the other hand, the Wife of Bath shows a view of women who are feminists and believe in male submission. She manipulates the story and her characters as she pleases. Both stories are prime examples of the downfall of men due to the influences of women. In The Knight s Tale, the downfall is death and regret. In The Wife Of Bath s Tale, the downfall is submission and the loss of male sovereignty.

Palamon and Arcite are two cousins who are both knights and are both captured by King Theseus. They were both put to prison in a tower in Athens for a period of over a decade. These two family members have been locked up in a dark room at the top of a tower with no one to see or talk to and more importantly they have had no contact with the opposite sex since their capture. As Emily walks through the garden which the prison cell overlooks, Palamon sees her for the first time and falls madly in love with her.

I was hurt just now through my eyes

and to my heart

My guess is that she is in truth Venus (Page 53)

Arcite then gets in on the treat and he, as is cousin did, fell in love with her also.

The lively beauty of her who wanders in that place

yonder works sudden death..

I am but dead, there is no more to say. (Page 55)

These two men have never met Emily nor have they any information about her. One look and that is what it took to ruin a family bond between two jealous relatives. The knights’ emotions for a woman of whom they know absolutely nothing of, other than the fact that she is beautiful, reduces her to an object to be won and an occasion for adventure and courtship. What these two men do not realize is that neither of them will ever have this woman, yet they decide to fight over her and sacrifice each other s lives for a maiden that has not even seen them.

Arcite is set free but is doomed to never again see Emily; his broken heart causes him sickness as he s weakened by love. The root of evil that Chaucer uses to portray the role of Emily in this story, is that he makes her out to be an innocent maiden who is minding her own business. At the same time she is ruining a relationship that should be stronger than any lust or love no matter what the circumstances are.

The victory is yours in this adventure;

Most happily you may stay in prison

I ought indeed to perish in hopelessness and distress. (Page 59)

On the one hand Emily s stroll in the garden has caused Arcite to feel sick and his physical status proves it. On the other hand, Palamon is stuck in a cell crying all the time and contemplating killing himself so he will not have to go through these feelings of pain everyday that appears to have no end.

Alas, I see a serpent or a thief,

who has done mischief to many a true man

I must stay in prison by the will of Saturn (Page 63)

All these crisises because of one woman, and an accumulated feeling of lust and distress. The king gives no thought as to whether Emily wants to marry either of the two men, and makes the decision for her. He is the person who controls her fate. This is an example of how women were treated during Chaucer’s time. They were given little or no respect at all and were treated as objects. Arcite ends up losing his life over an unimportant issue and Palamon succeeds in marrying the woman of his dreams.

The Wife of Bath is probably the only woman who defies the rule of having a man rule over her life and makes her choices for her. She is in total control of everything she does. The Wife of Bath seems to have a mind of her own and opinions that are not supported by some people at the time. The most detailed and most criticized view of women s roles in this book is The Wife of Bath s prologue and tale. She is the only female of the three of the stories that were read that was given a free role and a personality to express feelings, beliefs and several other factors that have a connection with women at that time.

Even though she was the only female with priority in the stories, most of her beliefs were based on and defined by the males she has been with. Chaucer did not give her character complete freedom though he gave her the will to expose a point that was not something familiar at the time. She is portrayed as a lusty female who tempts men and takes their money, land and whatever else they could offer her. She likes showing off and intimidates people as second nature.

I would accuse them about wenches when they were so sick they

could hardly stand, yet it tickled a husband s heart, since he

thought I showed such a great fondness of him. (Page 201)

This is shown by her not being able to resist telling her companions about sexual encounters that she has experienced. She likes the idea of having power and to her, the sky is the limit. She would go to any extent to gain power; even losing her hearing in one ear did not seem like such a big loss to her when she looks at what she has gained in return. She even ended up gaining power over her last two husbands which, as she claims, were the hardest two to control.

She is manipulative in her ways and is a hedonist. She has had five husbands, three of which she used for their money and land, and the other two were used for sexual pleasure and an attempt at having a relationship based on love.

The wife is shown as a feminist. She believes in women being leaders in various things. She does not agree with the traditional idea of having men choose and decide. She wants to be her own boss and she will argue anything she believes in. As the old woman wanted in the tale, the Wife also wants what most women desire, power and sovereignty over men.

…a woman wants the self-same sovereignty over her husband and her lover.And master him: he

must not be above her. This is your greatest wish… (Page 213)

She contradicts herself a few times in the prologue when she says that lies, tears, and spinning are the main assets to women. This is obviously a lie in itself because what she is doing is using her body parts as her assets to gain land and money as two other assets important to her. She emphasizes her points in her tale as she shows the knight to be a gallant and powerful warrior who does as he pleases and once he is in trouble he turns to the queen and the old woman. In real life the Wife of Bath is trying to say that men go on about their lives knowing they have power and riches, once a woman tempts them, all is lost and they bow down to the female race and offer them whatever they own.

My lady, my love, my dearest wife, I leave the matter to your wise decision. You make the

choice yourself, for the provision. I don’t care which; whatever pleases you suffices me. (Page 239)

She says in the prologue how women want power and that is what will keep them happy. Later in her tale she shows that by making the knight seem helpless in front of the old woman and by asking her what she thinks the best choice is and what decision to make. Without a doubt the knight is not stupid either, he would not want his wife to cheat on him or be ugly, so he leaves the decision to his wife. In the tale the characters with power were the queen and the old woman, the king gave the queen the choice to either have the knight put to death or save him. Because of this desire for power the wife becomes jealous of the old woman when it comes to her last husband. She identifies with the old woman and wishes that even though she is ugly, as the old woman is, she could have the power that the old woman has. She wants the power to be given to her from her partner so that she too can make the decisions and the choices and not have those taken away from her.

In conclusion, through the tales of the Wife of Bath and the Knight, Chaucer shows two points of view on women. The Wife of Bath represented the wicked extremist feminist who is after power and pleasure, while Emily represented the woman as an innocent, beautiful maiden who is clueless about issues concerning men. These two characters constantly served as opposite descriptions in appearances, general manners, and way of life and most importantly in their behavior towards men. The Knight s Tale revolved around the presence of Emily, while The Wife of Bath s Tale revolved around her past personal experience and her way of life.