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Questionable Decisions by the Wife of Bath

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer creates a wonderfully complex character in the Wife of Bath. She exhibits many traits easily identifiable as virtuous--honesty, cheerfulness, and the desire to follow the teachings of the Bible. At other times she reveals traits easily perceived as negative--greed, cruelty, and promiscuity. By the end of her tale to the other pilgrims, more light is shed on her character when it becomes apparent that her tale parallels certain aspects of her own life. Understanding the Wife of Bath's motivations for her actions through the tale provides an explanation, and, from a sympathetic point of view, an excuse for her negative behavior. Through the voice of the old hag giving the knight two choices, the Wife of Bath highlights an issue that has been central to the formation of her own moral character. She strongly believes that God gave her the freedom of choice, and she is taking that freedom to make decisions in her own best interest. Her decisions and resulting behavior, although morally questionable, are the result of her attempts to rise above her station in life.

Evidence of this freedom of choice is shown when the old hag in the tale poses this question to the knight: "You have two choices; which one will you try" (Chaucer 291)? In addition to pointing out his right to choose, the question contains the interesting word "try" instead of "choose". "Try" implies the possibility of making the wrong decision. This word choice indicates that the Wife of Bath understands that not all decisions are the right ones. Whether the choices she makes are truly moral is the question that leads to a deeper

understanding of her character.

The options given to the knight generally define and also echo what choices the Wife of Bath undoubtedly faced throughout her marriages. The knight must choose between a “loyal, true, and humble wife”, albeit “old and ugly”, or a “young and pretty” wife that carries the chance of unfaithfulness and falseness (291). The Wife of Bath would have been on the opposite side of this quandary, having to choose which type of wife she would become. She shows a basic understanding of the teachings of the Bible on marriage, when referring to Paul the Apostle:

No sooner than one husband's dead and gone
 Some other Christian man shall take me on,
 For then, so says the Apostle, I am free
 To wed, o' God's name, where it pleases me. (259)

Her statements are very close to what is actually said by Paul: “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (Cor. Book 1, 7:39). Although she often mixes her biblical quotes with irony and humor, or sometimes twists them to her own means, this knowledge should be reflected in her decision-making and behavior.

Ironically, the Wife of Bath repeatedly chooses to be the less-than-humble wife and to carry on with questionable behavior, despite her religious knowledge. This shows a failure of her morality, certainly. In the context of the Middle Ages, her actions might have been shocking. But Chaucer, being ahead of his time, understands the difficulty of achieving social and economic advancement for a common woman. The other women in “The Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* that have a higher social rank, such as the Prioress, are

more directly satirized, or even sometimes parodied. Chaucer gives the Wife of Bath an admirable independence, satirizes her less than the others, and contrasts her with the more common reality of a woman in her position. Seen from today's perspective of gender equality, the Wife of Bath's decisions to use her greatest asset—her sexual power—to advance her position becomes forgivable. Her success in the world is described in “The Prologue”, where she is called a “worthy woman” who has traveled extensively (Chaucer 15). By allowing her character such success in the world, Chaucer is condoning her methods.

After giving the knight his options, the old hag repeats his right to choose: “Which would you have? The choice is all your own” (291). The statement even more directly points out his responsibility for the decision. The knight is forced to think for himself; neither God nor anyone else can help. The Wife of Bath feels a similar right to choose. In “The Wife of Bath's Prologue”, she states this belief: “Advice is no commandment, in my view./He left it in our judgement what to do” (260). With the right comes responsibility, and she accepts this accountability by acknowledging her imperfections: “He spoke to those that would live perfectly./And by your leave, my lords, that's not for me” (261).

The knight's response shows the Wife of Bath's desire to practice good moral judgment, even if she has not been able to. Being a product of her imagination, he is allowed the luxury of making a very moral decision, humbly leaving the choice to the old hag, thereby imparting respect to her. Being of noble birth, he does not have the same challenges the Wife of Bath faced. Had she been born into a higher social position, it is possible she would have been a better person. It is clear that she simply seeks equal treatment, even though during her marriages this desire evolves into a domineering attitude. But that attitude seems necessary to help raise her level of respect against the odds of the times. In her tale to

the pilgrims, the Wife of Bath transforms this need for equality to epic importance, being the solution to the knight's year-long quest to discover what women most desire. The knight answers that "A woman wants the self-same sovereignty/over her husband ...he must not be above her" (286).

The Wife of Bath, therefore, can be seen as a woman who has taken her understanding of the teachings of the Bible, and held fast to certain notions that can help her succeed as a common person in a period where social position and wealth are usually a factor of birth, not personal effort. The notions of the right and freedom to make decisions, especially those regarding marriage and personal actions, allow her to travel, to have some nice possessions, and to become a strong, confident woman against the odds. Although she isn't perfect, she has the desire, the underlying humility, and the understanding of how to be a better person—if only she had made that decision.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*.

Trans. Nevill Coghill. New York: Penguin, 1977.

Corinthians, Book 1, 7:39.