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Choices

What do women really want? This question, still posed by men today (often plaintively and with great frustration), has echoed through the ages as men and women have struggled with how to relate to one another. One may turn to the literature of each age to determine how those before have addressed this question, as literature provides a valuable and fascinating lens through which one may view the evolving roles of men and women, as well as the changes and constancies of their relationships. In “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, a knight must answer this same question, or “What is the thing that women most desire?” (282), the circumstances of which bring him to a second question later on in the tale: “You have two choices, which will you try?” (291). It is in the knight’s encounter with the wise, old hag in the story that he is ultimately able to answer both these questions, as she helps him to understand women, and to see that the answer to the first question provides the key to unlocking the best answer to the second.

The hag is one of several women encountered by the knight in this cleverly spun tale, told by the Wife of Bath, a prosperous woman of the Middle Ages, five times married, who has no illusions or misconceptions about what she wants from a man. Simply put, she will “have a husband yet/Who shall be both my debtor and my slave” (Chaucer 262). The knight’s first “encounter” is with a maiden, whom he rapes. The consequences of this act set the tale in motion, as the Queen sends him on a quest in penance for the rape and also in search of the

“truth” of what women most desire. It is while he is on this frustrating and seemingly fruitless quest that he meets an old woman, the hag, and it is she who provides the knight with the answer to the first question of what women most desire; that is, “A woman wants the self-same sovereignty/Over her husband as over her lover/And master him; he must not be above her” (Chaucer 286). During the Middle Ages, men tended to idolize their lovers, to worship their lovers’ beauty, and were devoted servants to their every whim. With one’s wife, however, it was a different story; the wife’s primary duty was to obey the husband, and her wishes were not viewed as important. The hag, in her wisdom, knew that all women wished to be treated as “lovers,” with all the power that the position implied and bestowed, to be free to choose what one wanted, to be free to choose one’s own fate, outside of the dominion of a man’s rule. The knight saves his life with this answer, only to become ensnared in the trap of marriage to the hag, as he is bound by his previous promise to do the next thing she requires of him.

It is in the marriage bed on their wedding night that the hag further educates the knight, on the origins of gentility, the virtues of poverty, and the advantages of age and ugliness. She presents the unhappy and recalcitrant knight with a choice: fidelity, accompanied by age and ugliness, or youth and beauty, coupled with the constant, nagging doubt of infidelity. Does the knight remember the lessons he learned from the hag on his quest for truth? Has he weighed the truth in her lessons? The hag tells him, “The choice is all your own” (Chaucer 291). The knight, after an agonizing deliberation, realizes it is an impossible choice for him to make and wisely chooses instead to let her make it for him. In an earnest appeal to his wife’s better judgment, he implores her to “make the choice yourself, for the provision/Of what may be agreeable and rich/In honor to us both, I don’t care which/Whatever pleases you suffices me” (Chaucer 291). In his willing surrender of mastery to the hag, the knight shows he has learned his lesson. The

quest is completed, and the knight is rewarded with a wife that is both fair and faithful, because the hag realizes, as does the knight in his submission to her judgment, that it is possible for a woman to be both.

The tale of the knight and the hag is a simple and educational one. The Wife of Bath succeeds in her endeavors to provide her listeners with a story that “gives the fullest measure/Of good morality and general pleasure” (Chaucer 24), as her tale is one of universal appeal and enlightenment. It is a tale about the ever complex and puzzling relationship between men and women that reveals the existing inequities between them. It also provides the reader with vivid and powerful insights of the role of women in the Middle Ages, and their desires and wisdom. The hag, in her offering of two seemingly conflicting choices, seeks to educate the knight in his ignorance of women, as well as to present the reader with the opportunity to consider that life is not always what it seems. For hidden within the two choices is the implicit third, or the choice of not choosing, but rather honoring the choice of another. And thus it is in the world of the twenty-first century that the battle between the sexes continues, as men seem to still be struggling with the question of “What do women really want?” Is the answer still the same? Do women still want mastery over men? Or is it now a question of mastery over oneself? Perhaps women simply want choices, to be able to choose or not to choose, to know as the knight did, that, “The choice is all your own” (Chaucer 291).