

Student Essay on Wife of Bath and the Nun's Prioress in "The Canterbury Tales"

Wife of Bath and the Nun's Prioress in "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer

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Essay

The Canterbury Tales is exactly what its title states. It's a tale about a group of men and women, some devout Christians, some corrupted to the core, who depart on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, under the guidance of the Host of the Tabard Inn. Within this group, there are two women that draw particular attention. The first woman was the "Wife from beside Bath" (pg. 15) who was partially deaf, while the second woman was a Prioress. Although these women might have had similarities that were evident in the story, deeper down, the Wife of Bath and the Nun's Prioress are two completely different characters.

The Prioress, who was described before the Wife of Bath, had a "way of smiling" which was "very simple and coy" (pg. 6). Ever a nun, her greatest "curse" was "By Saint Loy!" and "spoke daintily in French...after the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe" (pg. 6). "For courtliness she had a zest" (pg. 6), a zest so deep that the Prioress "well sang a service, with a fine intoning through her nose, as was most seemly" (pg. 6). And even while she ate, "her manners were well taught withal; [letting] no morsel from her lips [fall]" (pg. 6). The Prioress' love for animals was never-ending, for she would "weep if she but saw a mouse caught in a trap" or "wept if one were dead" (pg 7).

Yet, the Wife of Bath didn't have a way of smiling that charmed everyone that saw her. Not a single "dame dared stir towards the altar steps before her" for if they did, she'd go "so wrath...as to be quite put out of charity." From the "hose [that] were of the finest scarlet red" to her "shoes [that] were soft and new" (pg. 15), Wife of Bath also acted as if she were of royalty.

Both women were "by no means under grown" (pg. 7); the Prioress having a "forehead... fair of spread" and the Wife of Bath with "large hips" and "a hat broad as is a buckler or a shield" (pg. 15). The Wife of Bath, apparently an excellent seamstress, enjoys fine clothes that were "finely woven" and of "the finest scarlet red" (pg. 15). The Prioress as well as the Wife of Bath both respects God, although the Wife does it on a much lesser degree.

1. Canterbury Tales