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### The Importance of Mutuality

“...Man needs woman (and vice-versa) in order to be a complete human being: in the institution of marriage, man and woman ‘become one flesh’— one person, a completed image of God.” (*Message*, 39-40) This statement expresses both the natural and essential nature of the covenant relationship between man and woman and the image of Christ in the Church which it should portray. However concrete marriage may be in this definition, it is far too often unknown to, overlooked by, and even disregarded by our culture today. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, which dates from the late fourteenth century, provides an examination of relationships by use of a microcosm where each character is carefully developed to interact within their community. The community Chaucer builds demonstrates issues of morality, and lack there of, especially in the man and woman relationship. In Chaucer’s time as in ours, people sway from healthy relationships and struggle to decipher what one truly is. One of the many necessary components for the man and woman relationship to function properly, in the image of Christ and His Church, is mutuality. Partners must have mutual love, respect, dedication, and willingness to sacrifice for the other just as Christ did, and does for the Church. Chaucer presents the issue of mutuality in the Wife of Bath’s and the Franklin’s tales and prologues. Chaos ensues when trust is violated, and one-sided, abusive relationships occur because of lack of mutual respect. Conversely, a couple is drawn

closer together after overcoming obstacles in a relationship because of faith in God, each other, accompanied by sacrifice and love.

The Wife of Bath is a promiscuous character whose relationships are based on manipulations. In order to achieve her own gratification she seeks power over others, and in order to justify her immorality she misuses biblical text. She prepares us for her tale by plainly stating, “the tribulation of marriage, in which I have been an expert all my life—that is to say, I myself have been the whip—.” (Tales, p.299 line 173-175) This statement encompasses her misunderstanding of mutuality; she deeply believes that one must be omnipotent over the other. Chaucer defines her manipulative inclination in the first section of the Prologue. Here she abuses biblical text such as in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter seven, John, Genesis chapter one, and Romans in her allusions which are delusions to justify her immorality. Although she presents the content of events with knowledgeable accuracy, her understanding of the text is unnerving. She is inconsistent in her interpretation and manipulates the texts to suit her “experience” (Chaucer 291). (Canterbury, p. 291) She translates Genesis chapter one to “increase and multiply” to justify her multiple intimate relations with men who she has no celestial connection and does not value. She states the positive nature of marriage from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter seven in an attempt to rationalize her marriages solely on the surface principle of legal bondage. However, in fact her marriages are not based on anything deeper; thus she has taken her source out of context once again. She manipulates her husbands in the same manner she treats biblical text. By never giving her covenant partner complete mutuality or any evidence that she ever sees him as her equal, she seeks for her relationship to end poorly. She has desensitized herself to separation (Mathewes-Green) by never giving

herself entirely spiritually and by using men as a tool for her sexual hunger and even a whipping post for her resentment of the male. "I never had any discrimination in love but always followed my appetite, be he short or tall, dark or fair; I didn't care, so long as he pleased me." (Chaucer lines 622-625) Christ's selfless love for and relationship with the Church is the direct opposite of hers. Consequently, she never entered into proper marriage.

The Wife of Bath provokes the discussion of current problems in society. Her use of biblical jargon parallels the portion of culture today that uses it to justify immoral behavior. The danger in this lies in the similarity distortions seem to have with the correct presentation. When inaccurate interpretations are learned as truth, our culture struggles to differentiate between actual truth and relativism. Jill Mann explains in her critical essay how characters' illusions are a "focal point of interest." She expresses that if we get wrapped up in their point of view, it dulls our own perception. We should in fact reflect upon their actions and our own to assess "moral judgment" (Mann 479).

The Wife of Bath has animal-like qualities rather than human qualities, making the aspect of mutuality in relationships a non-issue to her. We must acknowledge that "while man is less than God, he is more than animal." (Cronk 39) Animals do not have afterlives because they are not accountable for morals while humans should be able to determine what is right and what is wrong; humans must be Christ-like. She, however, seeks her own gratification, desire and glory (Lewis 151). Finally, she seeks physical relationship without considering the celestial aspect of the man and woman relationship. As a result she does not allow God to function in her relationships, hence she cannot achieve mutuality.

Chaucer uses the Franklin, a “sanguine” man, who unlike the Wife of Bath, presents a tale which demonstrates the inner workings of a mutual and healthy man and woman relationship (Chaucer line 335). “Their challenge is to find a way to manage, together, a mutually satisfying and honorable continuation of a good marriage.” They are able to overcome the obstacles such as “lust and greed,” which cripple mutuality, because they are willing to sacrifice for the other (Beidler 441). They are able to succeed in their relationship because they are Christ-like in their actions. They have mutual respect for each other as well; the Franklin alludes to Ephesians chapter five truthfully and challenges the Wife of Bath, “Love will not be constrained by mastery; when mastery comes, the god of love at once beats his wings, and farewell—he is gone.” (Chaucer lines 36-39) Like its teller, the tale is optimistic about the human condition and its ability to overcome trials and to have healthy and successful relationships in the “ideal marriage where there is mutual respect and enduring love.” The difficulty lies in the individual’s willingness to devote himself rather than seeking power over the other or awaiting a failed relationship (Beidler 443).

Our culture today still struggles with the issues presented by Chaucer. The problem lies in deciphering the line between what is right and wrong in a relationship. However, inaccurate use of biblical jargon hazes our understanding of the text. If the man and woman relationship is corrupted, then the integrity of other bonds is jeopardized as well and essentially the bonds of all relationships. Consequently because in relationships we should be Christ like, if we have a skewed vision of what marriage should be then we ultimately have an inaccurate understanding of Christ. A major misconception today is that the man and woman relationship should be without difficulty

when in fact it is true love that endures adversity. Unfortunately couples are “training for divorce,” by desensitizing themselves in their relationships, (Mathewes-Green) and becoming animal-like, eventually possessing characteristics like the Wife of Bath.

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X *Katie Hered*