

Cathryn Hennes

ENG 495

Midterm

March 5, 2008

2. Social Issues and *The Canterbury Tales*

This story was written during a time when social class was regarded with the utmost of importance. Only during a pilgrimage would someone find a grouping of individuals such as this, who come from different classes. The Host of the story was to be the facilitator, the man who judged and ordered the tales. And, within the story, each of the characters was to tell a tale in their own turn.

The character who seems to not follow the rules at all is the Miller. The Miller is described as being big, menacing, and having a physical presence. No one wants to tangle with the Miller. He is presented as being drunk. He's ugly and has a wart on the end of his nose. Typically, a Miller would not be found with a sword and shield. It was not part of his social class. He is the loudest and rudest of all the pilgrims. As far as social class is concerned, the Miller is considered the lowest in social rank.

In the order of the tales, the Knight was first, being that nobility would tell their tale first. After the Knight, the Monk normally would have told his tale next. Because the overall rudeness of the Miller is so apparent, the Host is unable to stop the Miller from blatantly pushing the Monk aside and telling his own tale. He tries his hand at a comic tale, scandalous, and involving sex. In his tale, he uses practical jokes and lots of physical action. He talks about how, along with social status, when men and women marry, their ages should be of close proximity. Starting on line 3221-3232, the Miller's Tale describes a carpenter, who is old, marrying an 18-year-old girl. The man is silly and foolish. He thinks this young woman will stay faithful to him. Because of her beauty, that just is not so.

The carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf;
Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old
And demed himself been lik a cokewold.
He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
That bad man sholde wedde his similitude.
Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
For youthe and elde is often at debaat.
But sith that he was fillen in the snare,

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He moste endure, as oother folk, his care.

At the end of the tale, the carpenter is being laughed at because, even though he is in love with his wife, his wife is cheating on him with a younger, practical man. Socially, during that time, a woman would not cheat on her husband with anyone. The take is very rude in nature. The other characters of the tale seem out of place too. Absolon was characterized with female traits, even though the character is a male. His character is completely out of place with the tale as he takes to romance but out of place. He's squeamish about farting. There's also Nicholas with whom the carpenter's wife is having the affair with.

With the Prioress, she wishes she was higher in her social status than she is and she should be above social identity. Because of her family being wealthy, she feels that even with her position, she should be higher socially; she has a position of higher authority. Unusual for the time, she is a nun and has a role of leadership. Lines 163 and 164 show how she was in a role of leadership:

Another Nonne with hire hadde she,

That was hir chapeleyne, and preestes thre.

She had another nun who worked for her, along with three priests. Her description in the General Prologue talked about how she was simple and modest in her smiling. She had a polite manner. As compared with the Miller, she was the complete opposite. In a general setting, these two individuals would not be found near each other. Because she was of higher social status and overall presence, she would never be found near the character of the Miller.

Each one of the characters in this story has an issue with social class. The Wife of Bath has been married five times and is on the pilgrimage in search of her next husband. Socially, she tried to be higher in the social status than she really was. Her first three husbands were old and had social status. She married them so she could marry into wealth and social status. The Knight had just returned from the Crusades, which is a form of pilgrimage. His ulterior motive for going on this pilgrimage was in question from the beginning. He doesn't fit in because he's considered old fashioned. He was paid to go on Crusades. This pilgrimage could be his spiritual function. Overall, Chaucer presents the pilgrims with a disclaimer. In lines 743-746 of the General Prologue, he directs the readers on how to read the tales. He has organized the tales in a social hierarchy, stating he isn't smart enough to do this. Because of the social mobility of individuals during his time, classification became difficult because of middle income levels, those individuals whose incomes were considered middle class individuals.