

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

Chaucer loves this character. She gets an awe-inspiring portrait, is a realistic character despite her knack for confirming the worst stereotyping of women, and is mentioned in the *Merchant's Tale*, *Clerk's Tale*, and even in the completely separate "Envoy to Bukton."

Prologue:

"Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (1-3) -- certainly a combative start!

The Prologue is a dramatic monologue in which the character is shown in her own speech: yearning and uncertain. She attempts to preach, but is self-destructive to a degree. What's going on in her mind? Some of this is almost stream-of-consciousness!

The Wife of Bath starts the "Marriage Group" as G.L. Kittredge called it (even though other marriages appear in the *Canterbury Tales* fragments), involving the Clerk, the Merchant, the Franklin. More immediate is a "Wife of Bath group" in which the Clerk is quiet and waits his time.

The Wife attacks medieval dogma and uses aggression as her defense. The primacy of authority over experience is turned upside-down. Experience yields tolerance, allows exceptions, sees other views.

On marriage the Bible offers no real strong scriptural statement; primarily the Church relied on interpretations -- more "glosings" than prohibitions. At first, then, the Wife addresses the matter of numbers of marriages. She has paid careful attention to one New Testament story in which Jesus tells a Samaritan woman that she has had five husbands and that the man she is now with is not her husband (15-19). The Wife misinterprets: she thinks the current man is the fifth husband and that Jesus is invalidating the marriage because it's more than four, which naturally seems arbitrary. She then cites the case of Solomon (35ff) who clearly had many wives. So in her first view of marriage here, it's the more the merrier; but is this what she wants?

She speaks about virginity, noting that the Bible, even if it indicates that virginity is perfection (105), does not and cannot command such perfection of everyone. She speaks about genitals, noting that "experience" (124) tells us that they're not just for urination. And she speaks of the complex politics of sex in marriage, often using economic language: e.g., "dette" and "paiement" (130-131, 154f). The notion of the husband being in control is turned upside-down. The primacy of the spirit over the body is turned upside-down.

Interruption:

The Pardoner interrupts with jovial insistences that he was going to get married but now he's rethinking that decision. He seems to bow to the Wife's "authority" in this matter. Why does he interrupt? The Wife banter back with him, and he encourages her to continue teaching "us yonge men" (187).

I'd say he's trying too hard to insist he's mainstream. We know from the General Prologue that there's something curious about this guy sexually, and I think we seriously doubt that he's engaged to be married. The insistence on the inclusive "us yonge men" serves as a strained attempt to place himself among the group. The whole interruption smacks of unhealthy overcompensation.

The Wife then serves up a sermon on marriage essentially to the group of her first three well-to-do husbands when she was very young and attractive and therefore had control. Another facet of the anti-feminist tradition comes again from her own mouth. She takes her audience into her confidence and admits, even brags, that she used sex as a weapon of humiliation, her chiding alternating with her sweetness to manipulate her husbands and to keep them jealous and on edge. She has pride in her old self and we hear of her accomplishments with a touch of nostalgic sadness and some guilt. She even demonstrates how she drove them bonkers pointing out double standards and contradictions in their value systems in her long "Thou seyst" speech (234-450).

She turns her discussion to her fourth husband who had a paramour when she was at the mid-point in her life. He didn't care about her so much so she should talk of her own woe now. She mentions wine several times at this point in her recollections (459ff).

Her fifth husband (503ff) was a clerk of 20 when she was 40 so the situation in many respects is reversed. He's the one who's hard-to-get and good in bed. She has the wealth now. He's a worthy opponent. A key incident in their relationship involved his reading and chuckling over stories in a collection of "the greatest hits of anti-feminism" -- the antithesis of what the *Legend of Good Women* was supposed to be. Concerning this kind of text, the Wife perceptively asks, "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (692) -- proverbially a lion's question when viewing a picture of a man killing a lion -- in other words, consider the source. Old clerks write "legends" so naturally women are villified. The Wife got fed up and tore some pages out of her fifth husband's book, he hit her, she played it up melodramatically, he was very sorry, and, once she thereby gained "governance" in the relationship (814), they lived happily ever after. (Except he's dead now.)

Interruption:

The Friar's interrupts next, good-naturedly calling her rambling so far "a long preamble of a tale" (831). This immediately enrages the Summoner out of all proportion, who tells the Friar to shut up and sit down. The Friar promises to tell a couple tales about summoners, and the Summoner vows to tell tales about friars, before the Host shuts them both up and invites the Wife to tell her tale.

Tale:

The Wife of Bath should tell a fabliau, but she tells a romance, a Breton lai. It's a Celtic courtly genre with magic. (*The Franklin's Tale* is the other.) You can tell a Breton lai because 1) the

narrator says "This is a Breton lai" or provides such self-identification, 2) the narrator says he heard it was told in Brittany (in the northwest province in France), or 3) the setting is mentioned as being in Brittany.

The setting is "the old days" -- a nostalgic time of magic when elves and fairies flitted about, whereas now we have only friars poking around (879f). Irrational violence against women is a *premise* of the story when one of King Arthur's knights rapes a young woman. The Queen and the court ladies plead for jurisdiction over his fate and decide that he's got 366 days to find out the answer to the age-old question that stumped Freud: what do women want? (So the rapist's punishment is to be turned loose to interview women?)

He turns up countless contradictory answers and the Wife cannot refrain from adding her own answer (932ff). She provides a digression involving another stereotype of women. Gender roles are inverted somewhat in that the barber in the Midas story becomes a wife. But the bottom line is that women cannot keep secrets.

The knight meets an old ugly woman who seems able to give him the right answer if he'll marry her. Does the Wife of Bath inhabit the character of this old woman? The result is the odd situation of this former rapist knight standing before the court ladies and confidently telling them what it is they want. Sovereignty is the ostensible answer here (1038).

After the marriage, the "Curtain Harangue" (1165-1218) or curtain-lecture involves the hag speaking of gentillesse (of deed, not blood), poverty (= honesty), and age (the knight will not find himself cuckolded). One would not expect all this from a young wife, but with experience comes wisdom!

Psychological depth is added to this tale in the form of the fantasy wish-fulfillment. But the old woman's magic is blind. She argues positions and department-book virtues that Alisoun has rejected, especially the politics of possession. To see identification is to sentimentalize?

The hag gives the knight a difficult decision to make, and when he leaves the decision to her, he is rewarded with the best of both worlds. As charming as the story's ending may be, the Wife nevertheless ends with a curse on those men who will not be ruled by their wives (1261ff).

The pilgrims respond unfavorably, or nervously. The Pardoner and the Friar already spoke forth and will engage in their "quyting" now; but later the Merchant and Clerk will respond to the Wife.

Works

Carruthers, Mary. "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions." *PMLA* 94 (1979): 209-222.

Crane, Susan. "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale." *PMLA* 102 (1987): 20-28.

Hall, Vernon, Jr. "Sherlock Holmes and the Wife of Bath." *Baker Street Journal* 3 (1948): 84-93.
This fanciful article casts Holmes as an armchair detective proving with close textual reading that the Wife of Bath murdered her fourth husband.