

The Wife of Bath

Chaucer appears to have had a special regard for this character from his own pen. She is the subject of an outstanding portrait in the General Prologue and a point of reference in the Merchant's tale, the Clerk's tale, and even in the "Envoy to Bukton"—a completely separate text from his hand. Her own prologue is a dramatic monologue in which a complex and audacious personality is fully unfolded. Above all, she shows herself to be a believer in experience rather than authority in human affairs: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage", as she says at the outset. The whole portrayal has often been interpreted as an attack on medieval dogma and a case of proto-feminism. It is also the linch-pin in the group of stories that treat of marriage from different viewpoints, a group which the Chaucer editor G. L. Kitteridge has described as the "Marriage Group"—i.e., those told by the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Franklin.

The Wife of Bath begins by addressing the question how many times it is legitimate to marry: she herself has had five husbands. Her evidence is drawn from the New Testament tale of the oft-married Samaritan woman who meets Jesus and the case of Solomon in the Old Testament, a man of many wives. In her view, then, the more the merrier. At another point she disparages virginity pointing out that genitals are not given us for to be ignored—or, as she says, they're not just for pissing. Her understanding of the politics of marriage—a matter of "dette" and "paiement" (130-131, 154f)—leads to the proposition that the wife can and should control the husband whenever possible. Here the Pardoner interrupts to say that he's been thinking of getting married but is now inclined to reconsider that decision.

Her account of her own marriages is ample and realistic. Of her first three marriages, each to older men when she was young and beautiful, she reports frankly that she used sex to control them and even cultivated a healthy sense of jealousy to keep them in her power. When she turns to her fourth husband, who took a lover when she reached middle-age, it appears that she herself took to drink in sorrow having relished the life they had together. Her fifth husband was a poor clerk of 20 called Jankyn. As a rich widow, she can afford to choose a younger man for her own satisfaction. It seems that he was a worthy antagonist and could give as good as he got. At one point she gets angry at his insistent references to a "book of evil wives" in his possession and tears some pages out of it, leading to a wild exchange of blows. Here she offers thoughts about the many writers who have characterised women as sinful, vain and bossy, saying: "Who painted the lion, tell me?" (692). The reference is to paintings in which a man kills a lion—presumably the version told by a man, not the lion. At one point in their quarrel, she weeps and asks forgiveness but punches him when he approaches. Sadly, he dies young.

Further interruptions by the Friar and Summoner sustain the conversational rhythm of her prologue. For many readers, the actual tale she tells is a disappointment and some conjecture that is simply attached to her in keeping with the anthology design of the Canterbury Tales. Her story is in fact a romance and not a fabliau—that is, a traditional love-story not a piece of bourgeois realism as might be expected from her prologue and her character. This is an Arthurian tale of a young knight who rapes a woman and whose punishment is an knight-errand of three hundred and sixty-six days to find out what women really want. Eventually the knight meets an ugly old woman who promises to give him the answer if he marries her. Oddly, perhaps, the answer is never given, but after their marriage she turns into a beautiful young woman, and perhaps that is answer enough.

The importance of the Wife of Bath in English memory is connected with the realism of her portrait rather than the literary merit of her story which seems, at best, an allegorical argument for the dignity of older women. It is only when the knight entrusts himself to the woman that his fortunes improve and the sentence of death is lifted. To this extent, the story is consistent with her secular philosophy, yet the genre in which it is narrated renders it a great deal less interesting and convincing than a novel-esque story might have been. Perhaps in this we are asking too much too soon: the novel has not yet been invented, still less the feminist novel. The Wife of Bath nevertheless ends her tale with a curse on those men who will not be ruled by their wives (1261ff) and several of the other pilgrims such as the Merchant and the Clerk prepare to answer her in their own style.

Adapted from a commentary by Dr. Michael Delahoyde (Washington State U)

<http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/The-Wife-of-Baths-Tale.pdf>