

The Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath has a reputation as the most memorable pilgrim in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and there's no doubt that her Prologue is a big part of the reason why.

The Wife not only defends her married and lusty lifestyle, while at the same time speaking of the "wo that is in mariage," but also confronts the medieval antifeminist tradition that boxes women into offensive and defeating stereotypes. The Wife's success at this endeavor is debatable; in the course of her Prologue she seems to confirm as many stereotypes as she confronts.

There's no question at all, though, that she gets our attention, which, in a tradition that denied women the possibility of meaningful speech, was half the battle.

And what was this antifeminist tradition of which we speak? Well, in the late classical period, a lot of authors wrote treatises about the disadvantages of being married, particularly for men who hoped to have careers as scholars and thinkers. Wives, these writers said, would talk your ear off, preventing you from getting any work done. Wives would demand that you make lots of money to pay for their extravagant lifestyle. Incapable of keeping their mouths shut, they would spill your secrets to anyone who happened to walk by. Women were presented as gold-diggers, only looking to marry for money. And so on. These negative ideas about wives gained support from St. Paul's counsel against marriage in the New Testament, in which he basically said that anyone who could stand to be celibate should avoid marriage.

By Chaucer's time, the antifeminist tradition had grown and spawned a huge number of treatises, legends, and proverbs about the dangers and annoyances of women and wives. The Wife of Bath refers to many of these texts in her Prologue. Her fifth husband, she tells us, owned a book that was an entire collection of such texts, from which he used to read to her every evening.

Because of this tradition, an antifeminist stereotype of women had taken shape. It held that women were lustful, dishonest, blabber-mouthed, greedy gold-diggers...sound like anyone you know?

That's right: the Wife of Bath. At one point or another in her Prologue, the Wife conforms to every single one of these antifeminist stereotypes. At the same time, however, she mounts a skilled and learned defense of marriage and sex, in which she beats the anti-marriage clerical tradition at its own game by citing numerous authoritative texts and interpreting Biblical passages. She even does them one better by adding her own experience into the mix.

At the end of her Prologue, the Wife rips a page or two out of her husband's book because she is so angry. Finally, the Wife has begun to seem like an actual person with feelings, rather than just a combination of negative stereotypes. In the Wife's transformation from caricature to character, we begin to see the way stereotypes fall short when it comes to capturing the complexities of everyday existence and everyday people.

Themes in Prologue to Wife of Bath's Tale

Marriage

The Wife of Bath's Prologue begins with a defense of serial marriage. The Wife of Bath, who has been married five times, launches her argument against those who might claim that a once-widowed woman ought to become a nun. The Wife's argument moves on to be a defense of marriage, period. She insists that though those who choose to marry might not be as spiritually perfect as people who remain chaste all their lives, they are still fulfilling God's commandments. The major feature of marriage, for the Wife, is the marriage debt, or sex, which seems to be why she's so strongly in favor of marriage. Another reason she's pro-marriage appears to be the ability to gain property, wealth, and a comfortable living situation through a husband.

Yet interspersed with the Wife's arguments in favor of marriage, we have her imaginative re-enactments of how she browbeat her first three husbands, and her ready admission that she was in those relationships only for money. The Wife seems to be saying that

marriage is a great thing for women to do; men, on the other hand, should approach with caution!

Sex

Sex in the Wife of Bath's Prologue is a hot commodity. The Wife is very explicit about wanting to have it often, and about trolling the world in search of its next source (in the form of potential husbands). As you might expect from a woman who suggests the most important reasons for marriage are money and sex, the Wife often links money *to* sex. For example, she calls her husband's genitals his "nether purse" and muses on the price her "queynte," or vagina, could fetch on the open market. Sex is also linked to power for the Wife; by withholding it she can gain material rewards from her husbands, and by accusing them of cheating on her or causing them to suspect *her* of cheating, she gains the upper hand in her relationships. One more modern idea about sex that's missing from the Wife's perspective on sex is love. For her, sex is about power, pleasure, and material rewards; like the Tina Turner song asks, "What's love got to do with it?"

Women and Femininity

The Wife spends much of her Prologue parroting antifeminist stereotypes about women, whether she's accusing her first three husbands of berating her with these stereotypes, or re-enacting her fifth husband's readings from the Book of Wicked Wives. These stereotypes say that women are shallow, deceitful, lustful, unreasonable, chatterboxes, nags – the list goes on.

Although in the course of her Prologue the Wife conforms to every single stereotype, she refuses to let them go unexamined; in a short passage starting at line 694, she suggests that men, too, would have a bad reputation if women had the opportunity to write about them. This analysis betrays how upset the Wife is at the way she and all women have been portrayed. At the same time, it reveals women as nearly powerless to fight this portrayal. This awareness of women's impotence in medieval learned spheres may be one reason the Wife feels it's important to instruct wise women in how to gain the upper

hand in their marriages, perhaps the only sphere in which they might have influence. The fact that the Wife so often counsels women to deceive reflects a cynical assessment of women's station in life and the means of power available to them.

Power

The "wo that is in marriage," of which the Wife of Bath purports to speak, comes about mainly because of a woman's desire for "maistrye," or complete control over her husband, possessions, and self. At least so goes the thinking in the Wife of Bath's Prologue. The Wife's method of gaining power often takes the form of capturing the moral high ground: she accuses her husbands of saying insulting things to her, or of cheating, in order to make them feel so guilty they give in to her desires. The Wife also emphasizes the importance of gaining control over the property in a relationship, although it's sometimes unclear whether gaining power results from gaining control of property, or vice versa.

The Wife shows an awareness of rhetorical as well as material power. According to her, (male) clerks have been able to insult women in writing for centuries because they've always had control of the pen; had women that power, they'd be able to respond and also to paint men in an unfavorable light. With this idea, the Wife of Bath's Prologue gains a new awareness of itself as rhetorically powerful, a power upon which it capitalizes to both confirm and trouble antifeminist rhetoric.

Wealth

In her Prologue the Wife of Bath claims to love sex more than almost anything else, but she just might care more about wealth. She admits to withholding her sexual favors from her husbands until they yield "raunsom," by which she means give her material goods. Her willingness to forgo sex for wealth probably results from her philosophy that everything (and she does mean everything) is for sale. Her philosophy seems to have paid off; we get the impression that the Wife has a good deal of property and a comfortable life.

However, despite the Wife's desire to accumulate wealth, she *does* break with her habit of marrying for money with her fifth husband, a poor student. He was good in bed, says the Wife, and besides that, she loved him. It seems that some things, money can't buy. On the other hand, it's thanks to the property the Wife has gained from her first four marriages that she's able to marry for love. This detail reveals the reason wealth may be so important to the Wife: it enables her to buy the thing she desires most, which is the freedom to do (and love) as she chooses.

Literature and Writing

The Wife of Bath opens her Prologue by bucking the tradition of expounding upon a subject by citing from numerous scholarly texts, or "auctoritees." Instead, she says, she's going to speak from experience. She combats texts against marriage by pitting somewhat obscure citations against straightforward texts and her own life experience, making the former texts seem needlessly complicated in comparison. The Wife's relationship with textual authority is complicated, though. Just as often as she displays a haphazard attitude toward it by misquoting or misinterpreting it, she also uses some authoritative writings, like the Biblical texts in favor of marriage and sex, to make her points.

Furthermore, some scholars even argue that the Wife's character is nothing but a combination of various antifeminist stereotypes about women, all of which are contained in writing. This means that the Wife herself is inherently 'textual.' Yet, even as she conforms to these antifeminist writings, the Wife rages against them, namely in the form of her antagonistic relationship with Jankyn's Book of Wicked Wives. When she tears three pages out of the book, and later forces Jankyn to burn it, we can see the Wife taking a stand against the antifeminist literature that constrains women to a few deeply misogynistic stereotypes. The Wife even makes the point that these insulting stereotypes only exist because women have never held the power of the pen. So her attack on Jankyn's book may represent the only definitive answer to 'auctoritee' that a medieval woman is capable of giving, though the Wife's lengthy prologue would suggest otherwise!

Old Age

The Wife of Bath is an old woman. We know that she's past forty, and back in Chaucer's day, people didn't live much longer than that on average. The only effect this seems to have had on the Wife, however, is that some of her youthful beauty is gone and it's getting harder for her to appear desirable to men. Old age has *not* dampened her appetite for sex. On the other hand, it seems to have had that effect on all the men her age, who have trouble keeping up with her sexually; perhaps for this reason the Wife has a "coltes tooth," preferring much younger men as sexual partners.

Beyond associating age with a loss of sexual vigor in men, the Wife also links it to a wisdom gained from life experience. She often refers to her numerous years to support the arguments she makes drawing on this experience. To sum up: old age in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, loss of beauty in women, low libido in men, and lots of practical wisdom. But also, and perhaps most importantly, it leaves the Wife in a nostalgic frame of mind, and she enjoys reminiscing about her youth and past experiences. And it is her telling of these past experiences that makes up a good portion of the Wife of Bath's Prologue.

Love

When the Wife of Bath first uses the word love, she really means sex. Yet, by the end of her Prologue, when she tells us that Jankyn was the husband she loved best, we get the feeling that love actually means love to the Wife. For her, love is inherently linked to money; she tells us that love too freely given is not valuable because it's "cheep," in essence inserting it into a free market economy of supply and demand. As she does with sex, the Wife withholds love in order to increase the value of her love on the open market. Her success at this means that by the time she meets Jankyn, the Wife is wealthy woman who has bartered love and sex for money on numerous occasions. Consequently, she is able to marry a penniless scholar like Jankyn. Arguably, the money the Wife has gained by selling her love has enabled her to finally marry for love. This last marriage brings the

Wife's economics of love full-circle: the Wife traded love for money in order to forego money for love.

Character of Wife of Bath

With her Prologue, the Wife of Bath continues the characterization we've already gotten from her portrait in the General Prologue. There we learned that she was a nicely-dressed, largish woman with gap teeth and a hat as big as a boat. We heard hints that she had numerous lovers before her five husbands and that she was a ton of fun to be around because "in felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe" (General Prologue 476). With the Wife's Prologue, we have the fleshing out of many of these juicy details from her portrait. But our analysis of the Wife's character is complicated by the fact that we've got to rely on the Wife's description of *herself* for information. And, since the Wife readily admits that deceit is one of women's gifts, and that she would lie frequently to her husbands, we've got to take whatever she says with a grain of salt.

One thing we know for sure is that the Wife *loves* sex. She declares that she plans to use her "instrument," or genitals, "as frely as my Makere hath it sent," and get busy with her husband "both eve and morwe" (156, 158). We can probably believe her concerning her true devotion to the pleasures of the flesh – witness her genuine delight in *thought* of Solomon's enjoyment of his hundreds of wives.

However, we need to be more cautious about believing that the Wife intends to have sex indiscriminately, with no objective *but* pleasure. Sure she claims she is simply looking for pleasure, like when she insists she has always followed her appetite, whether the men were "short or long, or blak or whyt," rich or poor (729 – 730). But her own accounts of her past relationships suggest that the Wife *actually* treats sex as something that's for sale. She admits to withholding sex from a husband "til he had maad his raunson unto

me" (414), and berating another husband by asking him if he knows how much money her body could fetch on the open market.

So, while the Wife may indeed be lusty, she's also strategic. We see this talent for strategy in two places: 1) in her account of past relationships, in which she always manages to get the upper hand, and 2) in her rhetorical technique, particularly in her defense of marriage in the first 170 lines of her Prologue. There, she makes her argument using texts, easily-verifiable life experience, and the mechanics of the human body itself. She makes the abstract anti-marriage texts seem irrelevant in the face of all the concrete evidence she marshals against them. She wins her audience over with humor, encouraging them to imagine Solomon on his wedding night, for example. She's self-deprecating, readily admitting to being less than perfect spiritually, but she also sounds authoritative by quoting from well-recognized Biblical and scholarly texts. The Wife of Bath continues to use these techniques throughout her Prologue, and they have the effect of making her really *likable*, even when she admits to her worst deceptions.

And deceive she does: lying to her husbands about what they said while drunk, lying to Jankyn about a dream she never had, and probably lying to us as well. All of these deceptions are motivated by the Wife's desire for "maistrye" – to hold all the power in her relationships. The Wife claims that she always achieves her goal, governing her husbands "wel after my lawe" (225). She maintains throughout her Prologue that she always manages to be the most powerful person in any relationship.

For this reason, the conclusion of the Wife's Prologue, and what it reveals about her character, is unexpected. In her relationship with her fifth husband, Jankyn, the Wife admits to a surprising amount of vulnerability. It's not just that she "loved him beste" despite the fact that he beat her, but also her heart-wrenching reaction to the horribly antifeminist tales he forces her to listen to every night:

Who wolde wene, or who would suppose

The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne? (792 – 793).

Given the Wife's blustering confidence in the majority of her Prologue, we definitely wouldn't have guessed she was in "pyne." These two lines suggest that the Wife's final stand against negative stereotypes of women is motivated as much by pain and sadness as by a desire for "maistrye." It's interesting that she chooses to conclude her Prologue on such a vulnerable note. This conclusion complicates our understanding of the Wife. It suggests that while she plays into antifeminist stereotypes, and even uses them to achieve her goals, she also chafes against them.

Character of Jankyn

Jankyn, the Wife's fifth husband, is a total departure from her usual marital appetite because he is young, poor, and extremely difficult to dominate. Jankyn is a clerk, or educated person, and in keeping with the portrayal of clerks throughout the Prologue, he often spouts antifeminist statements. Jankyn takes so much delight in these sentiments that he reads from a book collection of them every night for his own enjoyment.

The Wife tells us that Jankyn was the husband she loved best, despite the fact that he beat her and, when they were first married, refused to bow to her authority. Much of her love for Jankyn seems to stem from his ability to satisfy her in bed.

Despite the Wife's claim to love Jankyn best, his character doesn't come off so well in the Prologue. He beats the Wife and seems to take pleasure in his misogyny. Yet, according to the Wife, Jankyn is the husband with whom she reaches the greatest harmony (or what passes for accord for her), gaining domination over his mind, body, and tongue after a cataclysmic physical fight.

The character of Jankyn may actually represent the clerical class in general. So the Wife's eventual domination of him could represent her fantasy of definitively answering clerical antifeminism. Jankyn's presence also rounds out the Wife's character, revealing her to be as vulnerable to love as the next person.

Fourth Husband

Fourth husband gets a separate description from the Wife's first three husbands because, apparently, he does not bow to the Wife quite as easily. Instead, he keeps a lover, a situation which necessitates a different approach to dominating him on the Wife's part: the Wife makes him think that *she* is cheating on *him*, and the jealousy drives him crazy.

In addition to providing the opportunity for the Wife to describe another of her methods of domination, the situation with Husband #4 is also the first intimation we have of the Wife's vulnerability, for she admits to being upset that her husband takes delight in another woman.

First, Second and Third husband

What little we know about Husbands 1, 2, and 3 comes from things the Wife tells us about them, so we can't actually analyze their characters, but only the Wife's *description* of their characters. According to her, they were three of a kind: "goode, and riche, and olde" (203) – so old, says the Wife, that they had trouble having sex. By "good," the Wife probably means easily dominated – according to her, they quickly bowed to her authority after she accused them of saying derogatory things about women while drunk. After that, says the Wife, they were just happy when she spoke nicely to them.

The presence of her first three husbands in her Prologue serves the Wife's purpose of describing the "wo that is in mariage" because of how badly she mistreats them. It also provides the Wife with an ego boost because of how easily she claims to have dominated these men.