

## Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale – Lecture Notes

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### The Prologue

Wife of Bath and Pardoner's prologues – both long autobiographical in nature

Confessio usually

- Usually admission of guilt (Not done)
- Submission to god / man (Not done)
- Tells tricks of trade (both characters do this)

Alison from West

- West Midlands have reputation for religious decent.
- Bible translated into West Midland.
- Piers Plowman.
- John Wycliff 1380's translation. 250 manuscripts whole or part. (Church discouraged commentaries on Bible being transcribed.)

Possible Readings

1. Wife expression of growing secularization which challenged authority to church
2. Argued that she represents old law Old Testament post-Moses, pre New Testament.

Her readings are carnal, fleshly

Flesh vs. spirit

Old law vs. new law

Woman vs. man

She is spiritually deaf (see General Prologue). Therefore her readings lead to damnation.

Women in late 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries given voice for the 1<sup>st</sup> time

- Texts written by women.
  - Book of Margery Keep.
  - Julian of Norwich = God our Mother
- 1400 door shut, women don't write anymore
  - 15<sup>th</sup> century 1 identified woman writer
  - They show back up in 16<sup>th</sup> century
- Women writers in 13<sup>th</sup> century burned at stake for heresy.
  - Margery Kemp accused several times of heresy defended herself.
- Idea: when women write we hear a different story
  - See 1. 693 Wife's prologue

### Prologue in 3 main parts

1. Glosses arguments in favor of marriages
2. Her marriages 1-4
3. Life with number 5 Jankin

### Part One – Glosses

The Parameters of the Argument (ll. 1-3). Experience over authority.

- Medieval thought was if it was written down it was right. If question writing, might question Bible.
- Her 1<sup>st</sup> marriage when 12 (not unheard of) but arranged marriage. Marrying young would help control women's sexuality. Don't let them roam around.

Glossa Ordinaria – Glosses meaning of Bible – Four levels

1. Literal
2. Allegorical
3. Anagogical (Noah's flood = baptism)
4. Moral

### Wedding at Canon

- John 2:1
- 1 wedding = 1 time getting married

### Samaritan Woman at Well

- John 4:7
- Pun: Wife from Bath (Local Bishop called Bishop of Bath and Wells)
- Samaritan woman has had five husbands now has lover.
- She says to Christ "Sir, I see you are a prophet."
  - Samaritan woman – listens to Christ
  - Wife – deaf
- Marriage is a sacrament. Marriage reflects relationship to church and Christ.
- St. Paul says also joining of spirit and flesh
- She's not interested in marriage as sacrament.
- Wife prefers old law
- Five husbands five senses = ruled by flesh

### Arguing Authorities (A Sample)

Wife of Bath	Authority
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye; That gentil text kan I wel understonde. (ll. 28-29)	<b>Genesis 1:28</b> God blessed them and said to them. 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'
Problem: There is no indication that Alison has children.	
Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde Sholde lete fader and mooder, and take to me. (ll. 30-31)	<b>Genesis 2:23-24</b> The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman" for she was taken out of man.' For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."  <b>Matthew 19: 3-10</b> Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the

	<p>beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."</p> <p>"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."</p> <p>The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."</p> <p><b>Ephesians 5:28-33</b></p> <p>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.</p>
<p>Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon, Som cristen man shal wedde me anon, For thanne, th' apostle seith that I am free To wedde, a goddes half, where it liketh me. (ll. 47-50)</p>	<p><b>Romans 7: 2-3</b></p> <p>For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.</p>
<p>He seith that to be wedded is no synne;</p>	<p><b>1 Corinthians 7: 28</b></p>

<p>Bet is to be wedded than to brynne (ll. 51-52)</p>	<p>“But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.”</p> <p><b>1 Corinthians 7: 8-9</b></p> <p>“Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”</p>
<p>What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamy? (ll. 53-54)</p>	<p><b>Genesis 4:19</b></p> <p>“Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah.”</p>
<p>I woot wel abraham was an hooly man (l. 55)</p>	<p><b>Genesis 11:29</b></p> <p>“Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah.”</p> <p><b>Genesis 16:3</b></p> <p>“So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.”</p> <p><b>Genesis 25:1</b></p> <p>“Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah.”</p> <p><b>Genesis 25:6</b></p> <p>“But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east.”</p>
<p>And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan; And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two (ll. 51-2)</p>	<p><b>Genesis 29:21-23</b></p> <p>Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her."</p> <p>So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her.</p> <p><b>Genesis 29:28-30</b></p> <p>He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his servant girl Bilhah</p>

	<p>to his daughter Rachel as her maidservant. Jacob lay with Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.</p> <p><b>Genesis 30: 3-4</b>  “Then she said, ‘Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family.’  So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob slept with her”</p> <p><b>Genesis 30: 9</b>  “When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her maidservant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.”</p>
<p>Men may conseille a womman to been oon,  But conseillyng is no comandement.  He putte it in oure owene juggement;  For hadde God comanded maydenhede,  Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with  the dede. (ll. 66-70)</p>	<p><b>1 Corinthians 7:6</b>  I say this as a concession, not as a command.</p> <p><b>1 Corinthians 7:25</b>  Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.</p>
<p>It liketh hem to be clene, body and goost;  Of myn estaat I nyl nat make no boost.  For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,  He nath nat every vessel al of gold;  Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord  servyse. (ll. 97-101)</p>	<p><b>2 Timothy: 2: 20-21</b>  In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.</p>

**Part II – Husbands 1 - 4**

Serial Polygamy – not unknown but usually men. She reverses that.

- Today may be called black widow.
- Easier for man to pull it off even today.

Controls her husbands through sex

She doesn't seem to like sex with her first husband only does it when she wants something

Wife is antifeminist nightmare

**Part III – Jankyn**

Married for love.

Half her age.

Jankin's Books of Wicked Wives

- o St. Jerome – *Adversus Jovinianum*
- o Jerome anti-marriage

- For someone who hates Jankin's book she quotes from it (without commentary) an awful lot.

Jankin disappears. What happens after the fight? Where is he?

### **Some General Notes**

- Trapped in patriarchal structure only way she can see way out is to create another power structure in reverse = clue to false reading
- She wants a normal life like a man.
- (Paradox) In her defiance of the stereotype she confirms it by her existence
- Trapped in system but the system is all she has. She calls on it in the end by cursing (powerlessness).
- By using language she has power but is father's (Masculine) language
  - How can you dismantle the house of the father with the tools of the father

### **Wife of Bath's Tale**

#### **A walk through**

- The fairies are gone because of the friars
  - Complementing the Friar (Flirting)?
  - Complaint against the friars?
- The knight rapes a woman and is to be put to death
  - The *Art of Courtly Love* says that it is appropriate to rape a peasant since they cannot love
  - If it were a noble woman, the normal punishment would be a fine.
- The old woman's arguments
  - Speaks of "Gentillesse" (theme will repeat often in the tales)
  - Gentillesse is not by birth but by nature. (See Clark's tale)
- Knight gives the old woman the choice
  - She becomes faithful and beautiful
  - Wife of Bath has lost her youth and possibly her beauty. Wish fulfillment?

#### **Discussion Questions**

How is the Wife of Bath's tale wish fulfillment? (Both for herself and for women in general)

Would the tale be different if told be a man?

The same person wrote both the Knight's Tale and the Wife's Tale. How can you tell that they were told be two different characters?