

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Love and Marriage in the Wife of Bath's Prologue

Introduction

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* provides an introduction to medieval ideas about marriage and love. The *Prologue* begins like a sermon and then takes on the terms of misogyny and misogamy as the Wife describes her first three marriages, demonstrating her success in manipulating the marriage system to her own advantage as a means to consolidate money and power. When the Wife speaks of her fourth and fifth husbands, however, the *Prologue* becomes more personal, like a modern autobiography, exploring the role of love in marriage and its relationship to gender hierarchy and domestic violence. In her prologue, Chaucer's Wife defends marriage against religious teachings that claim that it is inferior to celibacy, maintaining the association of marriage with sex but embracing a more modern perspective that sexual pleasure is a virtue and rejecting the idea that wives should always obey their husbands. The *Prologue* presents both the challenges to women's agency posed by medieval marriage and, conversely, the ways existing practices of medieval marriage could be manipulated to empower women.

As the information in the "Tools" section below will demonstrate, marriage teachings and practices in late medieval English culture were far from homogeneous, despite a persistent modern idea that medieval marriage exemplified patriarchy at its most extreme. Instead, medieval marriage was represented in complex and contradictory ways that combined, for example, an insistence on marital sexuality with a definition of marriage that did not require sex and a demand for both mutual love between the spouses and the rulership of husbands over wives. Perhaps because of the complexity of ideas about marriage in the period, the topic was broadly central to late medieval literature, and a topic through which medieval culture debated topics as diverse as the roles of gender, sexuality, social hierarchy, and the relationship of lay and clerical authority. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* manipulates existing conventions of marriage in innovative ways, providing a model for social change that is not radical but provisionary and partial.

Let's pause to think about some general questions before moving on: Can you think of ways that the meaning of marriage is contested in our world today? In what ways do modern political concerns shape our private experiences of marriage? What are examples of social change in the modern world that have been accomplished by reworking existing conventions rather than by radical change?

Tools

Although the Wife of Bath challenges masculine and clerical authority, she does not challenge a conventional association of marriage with sexuality in the late medieval period. Many modern feminists see sexuality as a form of agency and female empowerment, but the Wife's *Prologue* engages with paradigms of clerical teaching that associate sexuality with sin. To understand the Wife's *Prologue*, then, we need to consider contemporary teachings about marriage and sex. Do you think it is possible to see the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as feminist if it celebrates sex in a culture that saw it as sinful? Critics such as Carolyn Dinshaw in her book *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* have argued that the Wife of Bath represents feminist values in that she challenges patriarchy and gives voice to female desire. Others, such as Elaine

Tuttle Hansen, emphasize the ways in which, despite the fullness of her characterization, the Wife is not a person but a fictional construction of male misogynist discourse, “a dramatic and important instance of woman’s silence and suppression” (29).

Unlike many contemporary societies, which often place marriage and family values at the center of religious practice, in the Middle Ages marriage was associated with sexual activity and, thus, was considered less spiritual than celibacy, which was required for the clergy. Medieval sermons and theologians often cited St. Paul First Corinthians 7, which recommended continence and linked abstinence from sex to a greater reward in heaven. St. Paul allowed that those who were not able to abstain from sex were better married than not: “but if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt” (1 Corinthians 7:9). In his analysis of this same biblical passage, St. Jerome identified marriage as the lesser of two evils, superior only to fornication (Jerome 420). In this view, the limited virtue of marriage lay in its ability to protect the spouses from sex outside of marriage. Where does the Wife cite “the Apostle”? How do her readings compare to St. Jerome’s? To your own reading of the biblical text?

Medieval sermons were critical of widows who chose to remarry, especially those who had already had children, suggesting that they were motivated primarily by sexual appetite. How does the Wife use her status as a widow to gain power? The hierarchy of sexual status was frequently used to categorize women and was typically referred to as “The Three Grades of Chastity” with virgin at the top, widow in the middle, and wife at the bottom. In this scheme, a woman’s virtue was tied to the degree to which she rejected sexuality. Women were frequently identified by marital status in contrast to men, who were often defined by their jobs. Why do you think Alison of Bath is identified as “the Wife” instead of as a cloth merchant in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (another male figure in the tales gets the name “the Merchant”)? How does Chaucer’s Wife challenge the hierarchy of the Three Grades of Chastity? Why do you think the Wife is depicted without children?

The denigration of marriage was tied to the low valuation of sex in medieval clerical teaching. Even within marriage, preachers taught that sexual pleasure was “lust” and considered sinful. Following St. Augustine’s notion that sin was determined by intention rather than by the act itself, preachers taught that sex was only sinless if undertaken in an effort to have children or to save one’s spouse from fornication but not if experienced as pleasurable (Payer 84-110). Despite its bad reputation, sex was considered an obligation in marriage if requested by either the husband or the wife in an effort to avoid fornication. This obligation was known as the “marital debt” (or “conjugal debt”) and was often justified in an interpretation of St. Paul: “Let the husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife also in like manner to her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:3-4; Payer 89-98). St. Paul specified that marriage was not sinful (“if thou take a wife, then thou hast not sinned”) but, he said, married people will “have tribulation in the flesh” (7:28). Medieval preachers interpreted this to mean that because there were acceptable reasons to have sex in marriage, being married required constantly resisting the enjoyment of sex. Marriage’s association with sex in contrast to the ostensibly superior practice of clerical celibacy was one of the ways that clerical superiority was asserted over lay people in the religious texts of the period (Lipton 4-9). This explains why Chaucer’s Wife’s celebration of sex is linked to her challenges to clerical authority.

Although the “Three Grades of Chastity” associated marriage with sex, sex was not required for marriage in legal and sacramental definitions. Basing his analysis in the biblical example of Mary and Joseph, St. Augustine argued that the essence of marriage was the “affections of the mind” rather than sex. When the marriage sacrament was formally defined in the twelfth century, the mutual love between spouses (expressed in the exchange of marriage vows) was

determined to be the substance of the marriage sacrament; this love in turn was both the sign and substance of God's grace. This vision of marriage as a sacrament based in love dignified marriage as a spiritual practice (Lipton 4-9). Medieval church courts upheld this sacramental definition of marriage as the consent between two parties as expressed in the exchange of marriage vows (McSheffrey, Helmholz). Defining marriage in this way meant that the approval of families and presence of clergy was not legally necessary, although families could and did pressure women in their choice of partners (Sheehan 87-117). Although this definition of marriage as consent applied to all medieval women, historians have shown that in practice, women in the middle sections of society (whom we would now identify as "middle class" including cloth merchants like Chaucer's Wife of Bath) exercised the greatest choice of marriage partners. As we will see, this idea of marriage as grounded in mutual love and mutual choice helps us understand the end of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

The idea that marriage was defined by mutual love was juxtaposed in medieval sermons with a seemingly opposite view that husbands should rule over their wives (Galloway, Sheehan 262-77). These paradoxical views were often expressed at the same time in sermons and in handbooks that instructed priests on how to perform confession. Chaucer was certainly aware of this tradition since his *Parson's Tale* is structured like a confessor's handbook. The section on lust juxtaposes the importance of mutual love between spouses with the need for a wife to obey her husband. Chaucer's Parson instructs: "God ne made nat womman of the foot of Adam, for she ne sholde nat been holden to lowe; for she kan nat paciently suffre. But God made womman of the ryb of Adam, for womman sholde be felawe unto man. / Man sholde bere hym to his wyf in feith, in trouthe, and in love . . . / Now how that a womman sholde be subget to hire housbonde, that telleth Seint Peter. First, in obedience." (ParsT 927-29). In this passage, marriage combines two seemly incompatible virtues: mutuality in love and the rule of husband over wife? How does the tension between love and marriage in medieval sermons help us to understand the *Wife's Prologue*?

This idea that wives should be controlled by their husbands was integral to medieval legal practice. In medieval courts, wives were represented by their husbands (and by their fathers before marriage). All land and goods owned by a wife, including property inherited during her marriage, was legally controlled by her husband. However, a wife could operate a business separately from her husband and, depending on the nature of her husband's will, a wife could inherit property after her husband's death. This meant that widows could potentially be financially and legally independent from men in ways not possible for married women or women still living under paternal control. Critics, such as Sheila Delaney, have argued for reading the *Wife's Prologue* as a lesson on the ways in which wives were limited by marriage law and for seeing Chaucer's Wife as a victim of "sexual economics." Others, such as Laurie Finke, have emphasized the ways marriage laws allowed the Wife to gain power by using marriage to make money, locating her prologue and tale in the mercantilism of fourteenth-century England. Do you think the Wife's manipulation of the marriage market promotes social change or reinforces misogynist stereotypes?

Not only did the medieval legal system treat wives as inferior; there was a colorful genre of "anti-matrimonial" writing that advised men not to marry on the grounds that wives were intolerable. This kind of writing typically painted a picture of the "woe of marriage," a phrase used by Chaucer's Wife of Bath in the opening lines of her prologue. A widely circulated example of this kind of writing is by Theophrastus who is named as a source for the *Book of Wikked Wives* that Jankyn reads to the Wife in her prologue (Theophrastus, Blamires; WBP 671). St. Jerome is also cited in the *Prologue* as an author of Jankyn's text (WBP 674); Jerome's *Against Jovianian* cites the anti-matrimonial work of Theophrastus. Building on the

association of marriage with undesirable sexuality, anti-matrimonial writing depicts wives as sexually voracious, unfaithful, vain, acquisitive, and unforgivably talkative. Refuting a possible practical reason for marriage, this text asserts that wives are inferior managers of the household compared to male servants. These texts show that the bad reputation of marriage is tied both to negative views of sexuality and to the clichés of medieval misogyny, both of which the Wife challenges in her prologue.

Text

The Wife begins her *Prologue* by claiming that her authority to speak on marriage is justified by her experience (an authority not available to the celibate clergy) rather than on her ability to interpret the Bible, a practice she attributes to men (WPB 26). Nonetheless, the first part of the Wife's *Prologue* resembles a marriage sermon in its use of Biblical quotations and interpretations to defend marriage. Although no woman or lay married person could be a preacher in the Middle Ages, the resemblance of her prologue to a sermon is recognized within the text by the Pardoner (also a preacher), who interrupts the Wife to say "Ye been a noble prechour in this cas" (WBP 165). In this passage, the Wife not only threatens masculine prerogative, she also challenges clerical authority on marriage both by her experience and her command of the tools and strategies of marriage sermons.

The Wife shows that the same passages from St. Paul (whom she calls "the apostle") most often used in contemporary sermons to promote the superiority of celibacy over marriage can be turned on their head and used to defend marriage and justify marital sexuality. For example, she asks of God where "comanded he virginitee?" arguing that "Th'apostel" said men may "conseille" a woman to be a virgin in I Corinthians 7:25, "but conseillyng is no comandement" (WBP 62-67). Here, she refutes St Jerome's interpretation of this passage as condemning marriage, insisting that St. Paul supports marriage. She also challenges the view that sexual pleasure is problematic. Willfully misunderstanding the marital debt, she says, "Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe, / Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette. / An housbonde I wol have—I wol nat lette— / Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral" (WBP 152-155). In this passage, the Wife depicts her husband as serving her pleasure, rather than seeing the marital debt as a mutual obligation designed to protect against fornication. Similarly, she revises St Paul's warning of the "tribulation" of marriage, claiming, "Of tribulacion in mariage, / Of which I am expert in al myn age— / This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe" (WBP 173-75). Here, she celebrates marital sexuality and asserts her mastery of her husband, inverting the convention of husbands ruling their wives. Questioning the superiority of celibacy over marriage is one of several ways that the Wife challenges the superiority of clerical over lay authority.

After the Pardoner's interruption, the Wife's description of her marriage to her first three husbands invokes the stereotypes of misogynist and anti-matrimonial literature (Patterson 141). The Wife is acquisitive, admitting proudly to marrying for money and exhorting land from her husbands before she is willing to sleep with them (WBP 210-214). She reports that she cannot keep secrets. Her prologue is by far the longest in the *Canterbury Tales* and she says if her husband had so much as pissed against a wall she would have told her "gossyb" (WBP 533-544). The Wife boasts that she rules over her first three husbands, inverting the conventional hierarchy of husband over wife. Throughout this middle portion of the *Prologue*, the Wife continually reminds the reader of the stereotypes of anti-matrimonial writings by repeating the phrase "thou seist" (and "thus seistow"). She asserts the essential message of these texts, "that no wys man nedeth for to wedde" (WBP 274). Even before she talks about

her first three marriages, her words seem to have fulfilled the goals of anti-matrimonial writings as the Pardoner claims that her words about the “wo that is in mariage” (WBP 3) have made him decide not to wed a wife after all. Given that the Wife is the embodiment of misogynist clichés, is it still possible to see her—or the *Prologue*—as feminist?

By contrast to her account of her first three marriages, the Wife claims that she married her last husband, Jankyn “for love, and no riches” (WBP 526), and she celebrates the sexual element of their marriage (“in oure bed he was so fressh and gay” [WBP 508]). At first Jankyn seems to have the upper hand in their marriage as he subjects her to readings from his misogynist book featuring villainous wives from history. In this passage, the Wife articulates theory of authorial gender bias, arguing that “if wommen hadde written stories, / As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, / They wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse” (WBP 693-96). Her logic in this passage is similar to the one that shapes curriculum in many English departments with classes by female authors: the idea that the gender of authors plays a fundamental role in the stories they tell. Just as the Knight in her tale must reject misogynist answers to the question of what women want, such as riches and pleasure in bed (WBP 925), the Wife’s act of tearing of pages out of Jankyn’s *Book of Wikked Wives* is a symbolic rejection of misogynist stereotypes, invoked earlier in the *Prologue* in the repetition of “thou seist.”

After tearing the pages and a violent skirmish between the two of them, Jankyn gives the Wife “the governance of hous and lond” (WBP 814) and grants her the “maistrie” and “soveraynetee” over him that she had over her first three husbands. He also tells her to make her own choices about her life: “Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf” (WBP 820). This passage has been central to the assertion, famously made by George Lyman Kittredge as early as 1915, that the Wife of Bath seeks to rule over her husbands.^[1] This is certainly the Clerk’s view of the Wife and “all hire sect” (CIT 1171). But if the point of the tale is to emphasize the Wife’s desire for sovereignty over her husband, then why does the *Prologue* continue instead of ending here?

The Wife of Bath gives up sovereignty right after she get it, and the *Prologue* ends with an image of marital harmony and partnership. Perhaps, as Lee Patterson suggests, the Wife “is willing to abandon *maistrye* once she learns that he cares enough to grant it” (*Subject of History* 310). She reports: “God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde, / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde, / And also trewe, and so was he to me” (WBP 823-25). This last phrase, “so was he to me” marks the marriage as one of shared roles and shared affection. We are reminded that she claims to have married this last husband “for love and no riches” (WBP 526). The Wife’s *Prologue* has, indeed, charted the “wo that is in marriage” (WBP 3), but it also acknowledges the importance of marital affection.

Can we take this ideal of marital love seriously? How can the ending, with its fairy-tale language of happy ending, be reconciled with the depiction of her relationship to Jankyn as “dangerous” to her, a position validated by his reading misogyny to her and by his acts of domestic violence? How does the juxtaposition of love and hierarchy in medieval marriage sermons help us think about the ending? How do the complex and contradictory ideas about medieval marriage outlined in the “tools” section help to understand the contradictions at the end of the tale? Is it possible to love in a relationship that has not always been mutual?

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Notes:

[1] In George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 185-210) reproduced in The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue, ed. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2005), 539-46.