

## THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The Wife of Bath is one of Chaucer's best-loved characters. She has is the focus of narration for hundreds of lines, more than any other woman in the *Canterbury Tales*—and they are not lines of typical courtly lady description which we normally get in extended accounts of women. For a time it was thought that her personality was all together unconventional, and, as such, an example of Chaucer's modern, or even feminist, writing. Nowadays, scholars believe much of the Wife of Bath is founded on conventions (as can be seen in the textual notes, which highlight Chaucer's sources); but, at the same time, feminist criticism has achieved a greater level of sophistication which has allowed us to see the Wife of Bath as an even more dynamic character.

The first way in which feminist criticism has become more sophisticated is in not always seeing women as victims. It is very tempting to do this from our because of our tendency to judge the past against our own values. Doing so is not necessarily bad, but it can blind us to historical realities, such as that women were not necessarily always on the margins of power. More importantly, *literature* is not good evidence for how people lived historically. This is the problem which most concerns Chaucer. Not 'How did women really live?' but 'How does literature portray them?'

Literary attitudes towards women were polarised. The great female characters were either betrayed like Dido and Penelope or betrayers like Eve and Delilah. Chaucer tries to mediate between these two conventions. He puts both into the portrayal of the Wife of Bath, and that is what makes her appear to be such a strongly, individual character in the modern novelistic sense, even though nearly everything she says and does is convention, clichéd, or even direct quotation from other literary sources.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Mercury tries to convince Aeneas that he should leave his lover Dido, Queen of Carthage, in order to go to Italy (which will eventually lead to the foundation of Rome). Mercury argues that *varium et mutabile semper femina* ('Women are always fickle and changeable'). Virgil primarily portray Dido as wronged by Aeneas, and many followed him in seeing her as a woman betrayed, including St Jerome, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. St Augustine, on the other hand, tried to argue that Aeneas never went to Carthage, so that he could never have wronged Dido. Many followed him.

The idea that women were fickle and changeable was not lost, since it had authority from biblical stories going back to Eve; and it was even incorporated into the motif of the woman betrayed. The twelfth-century *Roman de la Rose* even attempts to give some justification to the changeability of women. There, La Vieille ('The Old Woman') gives advice to young women for courting young men (advice followed by the Prioress) and argues that you should make the most of youth and beauty whilst you can — any way you can — because men will eventually betray you when you are old and ugly. The Wife of Bath is at least partially modelled on La Vieille, and these concerns underlie much of her story.

But the mutability of women was also used to justify the convention of women as betrayers, deceivers, liars. This view has been dubbed 'anti-feminism'. Anti-feminism was not really an overtly argued ideology. Part of the reason for this is that accusing half of humanity of being more innately deceptive than the other half would probably have seemed no less absurd in the fourteenth century than it does today. The anti-feminist outlook was more of a position adopted to suit a situation. It tended to generalise specific examples of female conduct to all women in the same way that a woman who has been slighted by her boyfriend, husband, &c. tends to say in exasperation, "Urrgghhh!!! Men!". This became something of a literary *topos*, which was used in various ways by various authors. Of course, I don't want to excuse medieval writers too much. It was an extraordinarily popular *topos*.

In fact, the most influential anti-feminist work was not actually about women at all. This was St Jerome's *Epistola adversus Jovinianum* (Letter against Jovinian). Jovinian had supposedly denied that virginity was a higher state than marriage, which St Jerome wanted to refute Jovinian's argument, his purpose being to justify chastity in the monastic lifestyle. He wrote in a type of literature known as *dissuasio* (taught in schools); and his type came to be known as *dissuasio de non ducenda uxore*. The Merchant's Tale is one of these. The Wife's Prologue is a parody on this genre; its direct opposite. So Jerome tries to dissuade monks from marrying. In the process, he subjects women to criticism; but they are just civilian casualties of his saturation bombing. Nevertheless, Jerome's *epistola* became an *authoritee*, and later authors cited it when they wanted to express anti-feminist sentiments for their own reasons.

Jerome in fact gives a contradictory account of women. He gives an extended portrayal of women as shrews, gossips, and adulterers—but only after praising the good women of history who are commendable for their chastity (e.g. Penelope). In criticising women, he cites the *Liber aureolus de nuptiis* (Golden Book of Marriage) by Theophrastus, who argued that no wise man should marry. The primary evidence cited comes from proverbs about Solomon's wives. Note the contradiction: Solomon was known for his wisdom. These Latin works found their way into French literature, in particular into works known to Chaucer such as the *Roman de la Rose* (the speech of the Jealous Husband). These and other authorities are cited extensively in the Wife of Bath's Prologue.

Alison begins by saying that experience is enough for her, even without authority. La Vieille says love can only be learnt through experience. The contrast between experience and authority occurs throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. I think that in the Prologue we find such a babble in the authorities that they seem to be no more than a mirror to experience, which itself is contradictory. Alison first needs to justify her multiple marriages. She cites Jerome and even Christ who argue against it. She cites to refute them numerous examples of famous men with multiple wives (NB, not the other way around); and she asserts that arguments about virtuous life do not apply to all. She concludes: 'He [Christ] spak to hem that wolde lyve parfityl; / and, lordynges, by your leve, that am nat I' (111-12).

She then asks what genitalia were created for. The purpose behind this is that, since God created our forms, there is divine consent for their use in procreation. She says she will use her instrument as 'frely as my Makere hath it sent' (150). She has missed the point of chastity altogether. In fact, she frightens the Pardoner (163f.) by making sex into a metaphorically financial obligation in marriage: the husband's copulation is paying of a debt to his wife. This appeals to her because a husband in debt to her is her thrall. (155).

When Alison resumes she launches into account of her three 'good' husbands, who she likes because they were rich and old. Note that we are here getting an inverted perspective of the *senex amans* story. She stresses over and over again her the financial benefits of her marriage (*They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor*, 204). She tells how they couldn't perform sexually, and how she made them work so hard in bed that they cried 'weilawey!', but that they were her slaves as a result. She advises how she went about doing this, lying and deceiving them, and getting her servant to cover for her. She then goes into a long tirade exemplifying how she complains to her husbands that they falsely accuse her of all sorts of things. Note that repeated use of 'thou saist' or variations on that phraseology. The tone is wonderfully realistic. She really comes across as the shrew cowing her husband with her scorching taunts. But it's really almost a direct translation of Theophrastus.

Alison next focuses on her fourth husband. She remembers fondly her youth with him, when she often got drunk and then couldn't resist sin. But now the flour is gone, and she only has the bran to sell (477-8). Back then, she could torture her husband by making him jealous. Then she talks about her fifth husband, who she married for love rather than money. He was a clerk of Oxford, who was lodging with her best friend, also called Alison (a joke: it was a common name in Bath, and it may say something about her friends being like her). When The Wife's fourth husband dies, she marries him in under a month; and what's more, she decided to do it even before the death. The clerk's name was Jankin, and he had a book, which, as far as we can tell, is a collection of anti-feminist authorities, which he reads to Alison every night, enraging her. They get into a slugging match after she rips out three pages, and then, with cunning and deception, she makes him feel so guilty that he gives her complete control over his house and land. After that, they had no *debaat* (quarrel, l. 822). She has of him *maistrie* and *soverayntee* (818). After that, she is as kind to him as any wife from Denmark to India.

Most scholars agree that the Wife's Tale was originally the fabliau now told by the Shipman, and that it was replaced by the current Tale, written specifically for her. In all likelihood, it was written as a response to the development of her character through the Prologue. As such, it can be taken as a gloss on the prologue or a filter through which we see the Wife's argument. The tale itself is a Breton lay, a genre which dates to the late twelfth century. Minstrels from Brittany travelled Europe telling tales which often had their origins in Celtic and Arthurian folklore (Brittany had been settled by exiles from Celtic Britain

after the Anglo-Saxon conquest in the sixth century). Some were adapted by a Marie de France, perhaps a relative of King Henry II, and they became popular from that point on. Generally, they are short narratives based around a single episode, and they frequently have an element of magic. Clearly the fact that Chaucer initially chose a fabliau, a moralistic tale, and one generally about commoners, and then switched to a Breton lay, shows that Chaucer changed his view of the Wife's character in the course of writing.

So why does Alison tell such a tale? Her choice is appropriate for her profession as a practitioner of matrimony — since the tale ends in a wedding — but not in the ways one would have expected. The fabliau of the Shipman's Tale that was apparently once intended for her has as its main character a wife who gets the better of her unsuspecting husband, which would have been a more obvious fit. A clue comes from one thirteenth-century comment about Marie de France's lays which notes that they were especially popular with women. By giving the Wife of Bath a Breton lay, Chaucer adds another side to her character: she is an incurable romantic, a secret Harlequin Romance addict. The tale may overtly be about women's love of sovereignty, but it ends with marital bliss. It offers a fulfilment not only of the Wife's conscious desires for mastery and a young and virile husband, but of the desire she can express only as regret, for the restoring of her lost youth and beauty.

All the significant analogues of the Wife of Bath's Tale are in English—a distinction it shares only with the tale of *Sir Thopas* (which Chaucer's alter ego Narrator tells). The principal analogues are John Gower's tale of Florent from the *Confessio amantis*; the romance of *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, probably of the fifteenth century, though the manuscript in which it appears also contains some fourteenth-century material (including the Clerk's and Prioress's Tales); and the ballad *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, recorded in the mid-seventeenth century. If, as this suggests, the story was familiar as a folktale, Chaucer's audience could well have been aware of the perversions to which the Wife subjects the original story.

The basic story, of the hag (or Loathly Lady) who promises to tell what women most desire in return for marriage and who ends up by becoming beautiful, is common to Chaucer and all the analogues. Gower's Florent is however set the riddle as a way of avoiding a death sentence passed for an accidental killing, not for a crime. In the romance and the ballad, Gawain takes on marriage with the loathly lady voluntarily to save Arthur's honour, when it is Arthur's own life that is at stake for the lack of an answer to the riddle. Chaucer keeps the Arthurian setting, but alters the details of the story to make it shorter and more responsive to the purposes he has in mind for the Wife.

Chaucer gives no explanation of why his Loathly Lady is ugly, least of all one that places her under someone else's control through enchantment. The typical choice she offers the knight in the analogues is whether she should be fair by day or foul by night, or vice versa. Chaucer changes this formula to permanently foul and faithful or permanently fair and possibly unfaithful. The issue becomes,

in fact, one of women's virtue rather than women's beauty—an issue much more in keeping with both the Wife's Prologue and the whole antifeminist argument, with its polarised view of femininity.

None of the English analogues have any parallels to the rape at the opening of the Tale, although similar adventures are on occasion credited to Gawain in some French romances. The most likely series of analogues for this, however, if literary sources are required at all, would be French *pastourelles* and similar poems in which passing knights rape or attempt to rape girls found by the wayside. The girls are most often peasants or shepherdesses. The focus of the *pastourelle* is not on the virtuousness or lack thereof in this behaviour but in the inappropriateness of such relations between different classes. The classlessness of the Wife's 'mayde', like the anonymity of her hero, potentially keeps the story as a battle not between social ranks but between sexes.

As in most of the *Tales*, Chaucer employs the rhetorical device known as the *digressio*, and there are two major passages that have their sources elsewhere: the digression on Midas, and the hag's speech on *gentillesse*. The Wife mangles the story of the telling of the secret of Midas' ass's ears. It comes, as she says, from Ovid: but she insists on retelling it with her invariable bias that puts women at the centre of everything. The original bearer of the secret was Midas' barber, not his wife, so it is the Wife of Bath herself who is turning the story into an exemplum of women's inability to keep a secret—an inability she describes with comfortable complacency, as if she does not think anything wrong in it. Her omission of the ending of the story, in which it is the reeds that tell the secret of Midas' ears to all the world, helps to keep the responsibility firmly on women. There is no reason to believe that this alteration of Ovid's tale is not Chaucer's innovation.

There is no way we can identify a source for the Loathly Lady's sermon on *gentillesse*, since the distinction between virtue and birth was as much discussed by medieval writers as the wickedness of women. It was a favourite theme of Chaucer's, both elsewhere in the *Tales* and in his *ballade* of *Gentillesse*, which is based primarily on Boethius. The *Roman de la rose* also devotes several hundred lines to the subject, and Dante, who I might point out is cited with magnificent anachronism by the hag in the Wife's tale, devotes much discussion to the issue. The purpose of the discourse within the tale is to convince the knight to accept the hag in marriage by reason. More generally, it focuses our attention on the character of the Wife, who has social pretensions and wants to convince herself that she is worthy of them. What is notable here is that her arguments are not undermined by misquoting or other perversion of the authorities she cites.

The central theme of the tale is the answer to the question of what women most desire:

Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee  
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,  
And for to been in maistrie hym above. (1038-40)

This is what the Wife's Prologue has led us to expect, and why the riddle was the appropriate condition for pardon for the male violence of the rape at the beginning of the tale.

The sermon on *gentillesse* seems a surprising departure for the Wife of Bath. Given her social snobbery and her readiness to subordinate scriptural interpretation to her own sexual inclinations, it seems odd that her alter ego, the Loathly Lady, would be capable of the sort of high idealism found in the statement made by the hag:

Crist wole we clayme of hym our gentillesse. (1117)

Least of all do we expect a discourse on vice and virtue rather than men versus women. But the Loathly Lady is out both to teach *gentillesse* to her husband, and most of all to assert her own claim to the *gentillesse* of virtue.

The effect of the discourse on *gentillesse* within this tale is to alter the nature, not only of the story, but specifically of the ending. The change from his sources that Chaucer introduces here—the choice concerning ugliness or beauty—has an obvious connection with the Wife's Prologue and its discussion of the demerits of different kinds of wives; but the resolution, that the lady will be both fair and faithful, is implicit in the course of her argument.

Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,  
Yet maye the hye God, and so hope I,  
Grante me grace to lyven vertuously. (1172-4)

The emphasis shifts from magic and shape-shifting to inner virtue.

This new stress on virtue has a congruence with the very end of the tale. It concludes not with the woman being on top, but with the romance achievement of 'blisse' and, most surprisingly, with obedience.

For joy he hente hire in his armes two,  
His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.  
A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,  
And she obeyed hym in every thyng  
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng. (1252-6)

### An Example of a *Pastourelle*

*J'aloie l'autrier errant* ('The Other Day I Went Wandering') by Thibaut de Champagne (thirteenth century)

J'aloie l'autrier errant  
Sanz compaignon  
Sor mon palefroi, pensant  
A faire une chançon,  
Quant j'oï, ne sai coment,  
Lez un boisson  
La voix dou plus bel enfant  
C'onques veïst nus hom;  
Et n'estoit pas efes, si  
N'eüst .xv. anz et demi.  
Onques nule riens ne vi  
De si gente façon.  
Vers li m'en vois en riant,  
Mis l'a raison:  
'Bele, dites moi coment,  
Por Deu, vos avez non.'

Et ele saut maintenant  
A son baston:  
'Se vos venez plus avant,  
Ja avrez la tançon.  
Sire, fuiez vos de ci!  
N'ai cure de tel ami,  
Que j'ai mout plus bel choisi,  
Qu'en clainme Robeçon.'

Quant je la vi esfreer  
Si durement  
Qu'el ne me doigne esgarder  
Ne faire autre semblant,  
Lors començai a penser  
Confaitement  
Ele me porroit amer  
Et changier son talant.  
A terre lez li m'assis.  
Com plus resgar son cler vis,  
Tant est plus mes cuers espris,  
Qui double mon talant.

Lors li pris a demander  
Mout belement  
Que me doignast esgarder  
Et faire autre semblant.  
Ele comence a plorer  
Et dit itant:  
'Je ne vos puis esgarder;

The other day I went wandering  
Without any companion  
On my palfrey, thinking  
To make a song,  
When I heard—I don't know how—  
Near a bush  
The voice of the most beautiful child  
That any man has ever seen;  
And she was not a child,  
For she was fifteen and a half years old.  
I have never seen anyone  
With such a noble face.  
Laughing, I rode towards her  
And made this speech:  
'Beautiful one, tell me  
What your name is, by God.'

But she jumped up  
With her crook:  
'If you come any nearer,  
You'll get a blow from this.  
Sir, get away from here!  
I don't care for a friend such as you,  
And I'd rather choose  
A more handsome one called Robin!'

When I saw that she was scared  
So thoroughly  
That she wouldn't look at me  
Or give any other positive sign,  
Then I began to think  
How to make her  
Fall in love with me  
And change her mind.  
I sat down on the ground beside her,  
And the more I looked upon her bright face,  
The more it fired my heart,  
Which doubled my desire.

Then I took upon myself to ask her,  
In the most beautiful terms,  
To look at me  
And give me a different expression.  
She started to cry  
And said thus:  
'I cannot look at you;

Ne sai qu'alez querant.'  
Vers li me trais, si li dis:  
'Ma bele, por Deu, merci.'  
Ele rit, si respondi:  
'Vos faites paour la gent'.

Devant moi lors la montai  
Demaintenant  
Et trestot droit m'en alai  
Lez un bois verdoiant.  
Aval les prez esgardai,  
.ij. pastors par mi un blé,  
Qui venoient huant,  
Et leverent un grant cri.  
Assez fis plus que ne di:  
Je la lais, si m'en foi;  
N'oi cure de tel gent.

I don't even know what you're after.'  
I leant towards her, and told her:  
'My beauty, by God, your mercy.'  
She laughed and responded:  
'You make folk scared.'

Then I took her up before me  
And made straightaway  
In the direction of a small, green wood.  
Across the fields I saw  
And heard calling out  
Two shepherds amongst the wheat;  
They came shouting  
And raising a great cry.  
And I accomplished nothing more than I have said.  
I let her down and fled from there;  
I didn't care for such folk.