

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

SUMMARY: FROM THE BEGINNING THROUGH THE WIFE OF BATH'S DESCRIPTION OF HER FIRST THREE HUSBANDS FRAGMENT III, LINES 1–451

The Wife of Bath begins the Prologue to her tale by establishing herself as an authority on marriage, due to her extensive personal experience with the institution. Since her first marriage at the tender age of twelve, she has had five husbands. She says that many people have criticized her for her numerous marriages, most of them on the basis that Christ went only once to a wedding, at Cana in Galilee. The Wife of Bath has her own views of Scripture and God's plan. She says that men can only guess and interpret what Jesus meant when he told a Samaritan woman that her fifth husband was not her husband. With or without this bit of Scripture, no man has ever been able to give her an exact reply when she asks to know how many husbands a woman may have in her lifetime. God bade us to wax fruitful and multiply, she says, and that is the text that she wholeheartedly endorses. After all, great Old Testament figures, like Abraham, Jacob, and Solomon, enjoyed multiple wives at once. She admits that many great Fathers of the Church have proclaimed the importance of virginity, such as the Apostle Paul. But, she reasons, even if virginity is important, someone must be procreating so that virgins can be created. Leave virginity to the perfect, she says, and let the rest of us use our gifts as best we may—and her gift, doubtless, is her sexual power. She uses this power as an “instrument” to control her husbands. At this point, the Pardoner interrupts. He is planning to marry soon and worries that his wife will control his body, as the Wife of Bath describes. The Wife of Bath tells him to have patience and to listen to the whole tale to see if it reveals the truth about marriage. Of her five husbands, three have been “good” and two have been “bad.” The first three were good, she admits, mostly because they were rich, old, and submissive. She laughs to recall the torments that she put these men through and recounts a typical conversation that she had with her older husbands. She would accuse her -husband of having an affair, launching into a tirade in which she would charge him with a bewildering array of accusations. If one of her husbands got drunk, she would claim he said that every wife is out to destroy her husband. He would then feel guilty and give her what she wanted. All of this, the Wife of Bath tells the rest of the pilgrims, was a pack of lies—her husbands never held these opinions, but she made these claims to give them grief. Worse, she would tease her husbands in bed, refusing to give them full satisfaction until they promised her money. She admits proudly to using her verbal and sexual power to bring her husbands to total submission.

ANALYSIS

In her lengthy Prologue, the Wife of Bath recites her autobiography, announcing in her very first word that “experience” will be her guide. Yet, despite her claim that experience is her sole authority, the Wife of Bath apparently feels the need to establish her authority in a more scholarly way. She imitates the ways of churchmen and scholars by backing up her claims with quotations from Scripture and works of antiquity. The Wife carelessly flings around references as textual evidence to buttress her argument, most of which don't really correspond to her points. Her reference to Ptolemy's *Almageste*, for instance, is completely erroneous—the phrase she attributes to that book appears nowhere in the work. Although her many errors display her lack of real scholarship, they also convey Chaucer's mockery of the churchmen present, who often misused Scripture to justify their devious actions.

The text of the Wife of Bath's Prologue is based in the medieval genre of allegorical “confession.” In a morality play, a personified vice such as Gluttony or Lust “confesses” his or

her sins to the audience in a life story. The Wife is exactly what the medieval Church saw as a “wicked woman,” and she is proud of it—from the very beginning, her speech has undertones of conflict with her patriarchal society. Because the statements that the Wife of Bath attributes to her husbands were taken from a number of satires published in Chaucer’s time, which half-comically portrayed women as unfaithful, superficial, evil creatures, always out to undermine their husbands, feminist critics have often tried to portray the Wife as one of the first feminist characters in literature.

This interpretation is weakened by the fact that the Wife of Bath herself conforms to a number of these misogynist and misogynist (anti-marriage) stereotypes. For example, she describes herself as sexually voracious but at the same time as someone who only has sex to get money, thereby combining two contradictory stereotypes. She also describes how she dominated her husband, playing on a fear that was common to men, as the Pardoner’s nervous interjection reveals. Despite their contradictions, all of these ideas about women were used by men to support a hierarchy in which men dominated women.

SUMMARY: FROM THE WIFE OF BATH’S DESCRIPTION OF HER FOURTH HUSBAND THROUGH THE END OF HER PROLOGUE FRAGMENT 3, LINES 452–856

The Wife of Bath begins her description of her two “bad” husbands. Her fourth husband, whom she married when still young, was a reveler, and he had a “paramour,” or mistress (454). Remembering her wild youth, she becomes wistful as she describes the dancing and singing in which she and her fourth husband used to indulge. Her nostalgia reminds her of how old she has become, but she says that she pays her loss of beauty no mind. She will try to be merry, for, though she has lost her “flour,” she will try to sell the “bran” that remains. Realizing that she has digressed, she returns to the story of her fourth husband. She confesses that she was his purgatory on Earth, always trying to make him jealous. He died while she was on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Of her fifth husband, she has much more to say. She loved him, even though he treated her horribly and beat her. He was coy and flattering in bed, and always won her back. Women, the Wife says, always desire what is forbidden them, and run away from whatever pursues or is forced upon them. This husband was also different from the other four because she married him for love, not money. He was a poor ex-student who boarded with the Wife’s friend and confidante.

When she first met this fifth husband, Jankyn, she was still married to her fourth. While walking with him one day, she told him that she would marry him if she were widowed. She lied to him and told him he had enchanted her, and that she had dreamed that he would kill her as she slept, filling her bed with blood, which signifies gold. But, she confides to her listeners, all of this was false: she never had such a dream. She loses her place in the story momentarily, then resumes with her fourth husband’s funeral. She made a big show of crying, although, she admits, she actually cried very little since she already had a new husband lined up.

As she watched Jankyn carry her husband’s casket, she fell in love with him. He was only twenty and she forty, but she was always a lusty woman and thought she could handle his youth. But, she says, she came to regret the age difference, because he would not suffer her abuse like her past husbands and gave some of his own abuse in return. He had a “book of wicked wives” she recalls, called *Valerie and Theofraste*. This book contained the stories of the most deceitful wives in history. It began with Eve, who brought all mankind into sin by first taking the apple in the Garden of Eden; from there, it chronicled Delilah’s betrayal of Samson, Clytemnestra’s

murder of Agamemnon, and other famous stories. Jankyn would torment the Wife of Bath (whom we learn in line 804 is named Alisoun) by reading out of this book at night.

One evening, out of frustration, the Wife tears three pages out of the book and punches Jankyn in the face. Jankyn repays her by striking her on the head, which is the reason, she explains in line 636, that she is now deaf in one ear. She cries out that she wants to kiss him before she dies, but when he comes over, she hits him again. They finally manage a truce, in which he hands over all of his meager estate to her, and she acts kindly and loving.

Her tale of her marriages finished, the Wife announces that she will tell her story, eliciting laughter from the Friar, who exclaims, “This is a long preamble of a tale!” (831). The Summoner tells him to shut up, and they exchange some angry words. The Host quiets everybody down and allows the Wife of Bath to begin her story.

ANALYSIS

In her discussion of her fourth and fifth husbands, the Wife of Bath begins to let her true feelings show through her argumentative rhetoric. Her language becomes even less controlled, and she loses her place several times (at line 585, for instance), as she begins to react to her own story, allowing her words to affect her own train of thought. Her sensitivity about her age begins to show through, and, as she reveals psychological depth, she becomes a more realistic, sympathetic, and compelling character.

When the Wife of Bath describes how she fell in love with her fifth husband, despite her pragmatism, she reveals her softer side. She recognizes that he used the same tactics against her as she used against other men, but she cannot stop herself from desiring him. Jankyn even uses one of the satires against women to aggravate her, the kind of satire that the Wife mocked earlier in her Prologue. Despite all this, we can see that Jankyn, though the most aggravating of her husbands, is the only one that she admits she truly loved. Even as she brags about her shameless manipulation of her husbands and claims that her sexual powers can conquer anyone, she retains a deep fondness for the one man she could not control.

The Wife seems to enjoy the act of arguing more than the end of deriving an answer by logic. To explain why clerks (meaning church writers) treat wives so badly, for example, she employs three different arguments. First, she blames the entire religious establishment, claiming that church writings breed hostility toward wives because they were written by men (690–696). Then, she gives an astrological explanation, asserting that the children of Mercury (scholars) and of Venus (lovers) always contradict one another. A third reason she gives is that when clerks grow old, their impotence and decreased virility makes them hostile and slanderous toward wives (705–710).

Twice in her Prologue, the Wife calls attention to her habit of lying—“and al was fals,” she states (382, 582). These statements certainly highlight our awareness of the fact that she’s giving a performance, and they also put her entire life story in question. We are left wondering to what extent we should even believe the “experience” of the Wife of Bath, and whether she is not, in fact, a mean-spirited satire on Chaucer’s part, meant to represent the fickleness of women.