

# Allegory in the wife of bath



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Bestselling American author Orson Scott Card once said, " Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space." The Canterbury Tales were written over 600 years before Card made that profound statement, but clearly Chaucer would agree with Card's assertion. Specifically, in " The Wife of Bath's Tale" one can see the use of metaphors to make broad claims in a relatively short story. For the Wife of Bath, the collection of metaphors in her tale creates an allegory that proves the claims she made in her prologue - an apology of sorts. Through rhetoric used in both the prologue and her tale that follows, the Wife hints at the need for an explanation and defense of her opinions beyond her narration of her marriages in the prologue. Furthermore, one can find numerous similarities between the Wife and the new wife in the tale, particularly in regards to her account of her courtship with and marriage to Jankin. There are several major parallels between the Wife of Bath and the wife of the tale; this analysis will focus on the concept of mystery and magic as well as the coordinating ideas and experiences of " maistrie."

Before discussing the apology itself, one must understand the desire that drives it. In her prologue, the Wife of Bath unabashedly unveils a number of controversial opinions about sex, women, and marriage. Evidently, she is aware of her debatable opinions; for instance, she consciously amends her prologue saying, " So that clerkes be nat with me wrothe" (125). The Wife's effort at least to acknowledge this difference of opinion shows that she is conscious of the need to prove her convictions. These tendentious comments of the Wife in her prologue claim to be derived purely from experience: " Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, were right ynough to me" (1-2). However, when it is to her advantage, she does not refrain from

quoting the authorities she claims are unnecessary. For instance, the Wife quotes Ptolemy's *Almagest* in the prologue. Likewise, in her tale, she goes to great lengths to use Ovid's story of Midas and his wife to prove her point about women not being able to keep a secret. Clearly, while the Wife believes experience to be superior, she still knows the power and importance of traditional, written authority.

The Wife's frequent allusions and quotes are not the only factors that illustrate that the goal of her tale is apologetic. She references Ptolemy, saying, "Whoso that nil be war by othere men,/By him shul othere men corrected be" (180-181). Clearly, The Wife is bringing the audience's attention to the idea of learning from another's experience. The experience to which the Wife refers cannot merely be the experiences she shares from the story of her five marriages; she begins this digression in the prologue by saying, "my tale is nat bigoone:/ Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tonne/Er that I go" (169-171). The Wife does not merely say that her prologue might change the listeners' minds; she says her "tale" will do so before she goes. Evidently, the Wife means her entire speech, not just her accounts of the five marriages in her prologue. One might object to the conclusion that this Ptolemaic idea proves her desire to explain herself; this is because in line 192 of the Wife's prologue she says, "For myn entente nis but for to pleye." However, when considering the contrary evidence observed so far, this statement seems more like an attempt to cover herself in case anyone is offended by her attempt to sway them in such a radical direction. So, due to the obvious need to prove the validity of her statements beyond her own

experience, the Wife uses the story as an allegorical apology that demonstrates her authority on the matter of courtship and marriage.

The allegorical part of the Wife's apology is found in the metaphors that connect the Wife's prologue and her tale. One such parallel between the Wife of Bath's prologue and her tale is the use of mystery and magic, or, more simply put, tricks. The mystery aspect is seen in the prologue when the Wife is discussing her courtship with Jankin. According to the Wife's account, one of her first encounters with Jankin was in a field: " That Jankin clerk and my gossib dame Alis/And I myself into the felde wente" (548-549). This aspect of " pleye" in nature is seen again the Wife's tale. First, the Wife sets the scene of the magic that lies in mysterious nature, or at least what used to be there before " the grete charitee and prayers/Of limitours and othere holy freres" (9-10). Nature again plays a role when the Knight first meets the woman who, unbeknownst to him, would soon be his wife: " And in his wey it happed him to ryde,/In al this care, under a forest syde...No creature saugh he that bar lyfe,/Save on the grene he saugh sittinge a wyf" (133-134, 141-142). The magical, mysterious way of nature acts as the catalyst in the Wife's tale of the Knight and his new wife while serving a similar purpose in the story of the Wife and Jankin.

The magic of nature lies not only in the " elf-queen with hir joly companye" (4), who the Wife claims used to live in the forests; the new wife also uses the magic of the forest to lure the knight into its depths. While the knight is riding by the forest, he sees many ladies dancing: " Wher he saugh upon a daunce go/Of ladies foure and twenty and yet mo" (135-136). As he approaches, however, they all seem to disappear; by the time he arrives at

the place where he saw the group of dancing ladies, all but one has mysteriously “vanisshed” (139). The only one left, of course, is the old woman who will soon be his new wife. She knows he would not come to talk with her if she is the only one sitting there in the forest, as she is very ugly and old. The Wife describes the new wife saying, “A fouler wight ther may no man devyse” (144). So to ensure that the Knight will come to her, she uses the mirage of dancing women to get his attention. The rhetoric in this scene implies some magical trickery at hand, like the use of “vanisshed” (140).

While there might have been magical devices involved, the new wife’s biggest trick lies outside the realm of magic. The new wife makes a deal with the Knight: she saves his life by telling him the answer to the question of “What thing it is that wommen most desyren” (49) – and, in exchange, he must marry her. Of course, he did not know that would be her request; he only learns this after his life has been spared for finding the answer of “sovereyntee” (182). Clearly, the new wife means to trick the Knight into marrying her. Furthermore, the new wife is proud of the tricky deal she makes with the Knight. While married, the Wife narrates that the Knight “walweth and he turneth to and fro./His olde wyf lay smylinge evermo,” (229-230). Despite the unhappiness of her husband, the new wife never regrets her achievement of tricking this man into marrying her. In the same way, the Wife uses tricks to entice Jankin; telling Jankin that she dreamt of him killing her to make him believe “he hadde enchanted [her]” (575). The Wife seems to be proud of this lie; she admits openly that it “al was fals, I dremed of it right naught” (582). In this way, both the Wife and the new wife of the tale use tricks to lure men to them.

These tricks are only the beginning of another parallel between the stories. The Wife and the wife in the story not only use mystery and magic to play tricks on the men whom they desire; these tricks work just as planned. The wives' tricks are clearly one way to gain "maistrie," the answer to the Knight's quest and one of the major themes in "The Wife's Tale." For instance, the Wife's trick of making Jankin believe he has enchanted her through the story of the dream seems to be one of the key events that leads to their marriage. In the same way, when the new wife in the tale uses the image of dancing women in the forest to lure the Knight to come talk to her, it works. The Knight falls for the trick and rides into the forest, only to talk to the old woman, not the group of women he saw dancing. As previously discussed, the trick that leads the Knight to the new wife is only the beginning; the real trick comes with the deal. The new wife uses her life-saving answer to trick him into marrying her. By observing the corresponding examples in the Wife's prologue and her tale, it is clear that the Wife advocates this use of trickery to gain power in a relationship.

Tricks are not the only way to mastery; both the wives also use their agedness as a main factor in marriage. The Wife is the older woman in her last two marriages. This detail is especially noted when discussing her courtship with Jankin; the Wife mentions in her prologue that Jankin is half her age: "He was, I trowe, a twenty winter old,/And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth;/But yet I hadde alwey a coltes tooth" (600-602). The new wife in the tale is also an older woman. The fact that she is "foul and old and pore" is mentioned several times by the narrator, the Knight, and the new wife herself. Her age becomes an obvious advantage when the new wife gives her

speech to the Knight. The new wife does not hesitate to mention “ ye gentils of honour/seyn that men sholde an olde wight doon favour” (353-354); honor and respect of elders is arguably one form of mastery over the younger person’s actions. If not mastery itself, honor is complementary to mastery and is, therefore, still an important component in this regard. Obviously, the Wife uses these parallel examples to show that being an older woman can have its advantages; especially during this time period, the Wife believes that being an older woman can lead one to the ever-important “ maistrie” in marriage.

For both the Wife and the new wife, tricks and age are two factors that pave the path to power in a relationship. However, the similarities do not end with these two aspects of gaining mastery; both wives eventually accomplish their goal of sovereignty after a dispute of some kind. For the Wife and Jankin, it is a physical fight, with fists being thrown from both sides. The Wife concludes this scene by saying, “ He yaf me al the brydel in myn hond” (813). Furthermore, the Wife notes that “ After that day we hadden never debaat” (822). In summary, the Wife and Jankin fight, but from this dispute, there is peace in the marriage and power in the Wife’s hands. Similarly, conflict arises between the new wife and the Knight soon before the new wife is granted sovereignty. The Knight is highly displeased with the situation, and remarks often on the new wife’s unfavorable characteristics. This verbal beating parallels with the physical beating of the Wife by Jankin. After the Knight explains his discontent, the new wife explains all the reasons that her characteristics are actually good things. Clearly persuaded, the Knight says, “ I put me in your wyse governance” (375). After the wife has power, the

effect on the relationship is parallel to that of the story of the Wife and Jankin. Speaking to the Knight, the new wife says, “kis me...we be no lenger wrothe” (383). In this way, the new wife, just like the Wife in her marriage to Jankin, secures power and peace after a quarrel.

In the end of the Wife’s tale, all is right because the woman has control; this is the Wife’s version of a happy ending. It could be a coincidence that the opinions and characteristics of the wife in the tale correspond so directly with the Wife’s ideas in the prologue, but the literary clues seem to imply otherwise. By examining the rhetoric and literary devices throughout “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” it is clear that through parallel diction and metaphors, the tale serves as an allegorical apology for the Wife’s tendentious prologue. The distinct similarities regarding mystery, magic, and “maistrie” are just some of the elements that tie the tale to the prologue in such a prominent manner. Therefore, the Wife of Bath does not merely tell a tale; the story of the old woman and the Knight is clearly meant to entertain as well as to make a bold statement in defense of her controversial opinions.