

A taming by a shrew?: levels of satire in chaucer's wife of bath

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The Wife of Bath, a pilgrim in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, holds strong views on many topics, such as sex, marriage, men, and the Bible. She speaks her mind clearly and at length, but she is also a manipulative, subtle, and untrustworthy narrator, who strives to control her audience just as she has controlled her husbands. She is both an agent and a target of satire; as she attacks men's unjust portrayals of women, she becomes such a maligned woman herself, a deed of her own doing. But though Chaucer uses her both as a satiric lens and as an object of fun, she is indifferent; though she does use satire, her goal is not to be a satirist but to control her husbands. The Wife of Bath's grievances and attacks are many; she spends more time complaining about her husbands than she does in telling her tale. She has had five husbands; her first three were "good, and rich, and old" (187) men with trouble in bed. She controls them by telling them all the things they are allegedly saying about her, that "' You say we wives will hide our vices/until we are safely married, and then we will show them;/that's certainly a fit proverb for a scolding curmudgeon!'" (195). She admits that "all was false," (199) but her method works. Her other technique is to bargain using sex, "giv[ing] them no pleasure...until he had paid his ransom to me" (201). Both methods show the weakness of old men willing to submit to a wife and confess to slights they have not committed, in order to get sex and peace of mind. Alice's subtler methods of dealing with these men satirize not only them but the cultural roles in marriage. Her husbands think themselves flattered when Alice stalks about at night allegedly to "spy out the wenches [they] lay with" (201), but in fact she enjoys her own affairs at this time. Her first husbands are foolish, impotent men, easily deluded and ruled by their

wife's manipulation of their roles. She plays the shrewish wife railing upon her husband, and she casts her husbands as the louts they are too old to be, "accus[ing] them about wenches/when they were so sick they could hardly stand" (201). Shrews, like Xanthippe, mentioned by one husband, do not make pleasant wives, but they also do not cheat. She defends her scolding by saying, "' since a man is more reasonable/than a woman is, you must be patient'" (203), using feminine weakness as a tool. Even marriage itself is satirized by her pragmatism. "' If I would sell my belle chose,/I could walk as fresh as a rose/but I will keep it for your own taste'" (203), Alice tells her husband; marriage, to her, is only useful in that monogamy helps her make elderly men feel guilty enough to give her all their money. The one husband she marries "for love and not money" (207) is the one who beats her. Alice's technique of embracing and using her wifely role confounds all her husbands. Her fourth is guilty of many crimes she accused the others of, but Alice's response to her lustful husband is the opposite to that she used with her unenergetic ones. She does not have affairs of her own, but only pretends so. She has no reason to cheat for her own sake, as she did during her previous marriages, but she acts like a bad wife to cause her husband pain. Jankin, her fifth, she catches by relating to him a dream that she did not actually have. She gives him control of all her property, but he beats her and lectures her with stories of ancient unworthy women and henpecked husbands. Alice finally tames him by melodramatically proclaiming, "' now I shall die'" (219) after he hits her. She accuses him as she did the first three, asking, "' have you murdered me thus for my land?"' (219), the land he already controls, when she knows that he struck her in wrath because she

tore a leaf from his book. With pragmatism, cleverness, and scolding, the Wife of Bath dominates her five husbands, demonstrating the faults of men and of marriage. But she herself is not entirely perfect. There is little difference to her husbands between a wife who thinks that they are sleeping around and a wife who only pretends so, between a woman who has affairs and one who merely presents the impression of having them, between one who feels wronged and one who exaggerates her sense of betrayal. Alice is a woman very few men would want to live with, yet she justifies her behavior in an attack on and parody of male authors' interpretations and writings. Preachers and theologians are the main targets of Alice's satire. "' I was definitely told...that since Christ went but once/to a wedding...by that example he taught me/that I should not be married more than once'" (183) she says, citing an absurd example of exegesis. She counters it with her own argument, both strong and weak in different respects. She cites Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob as having had more than one wife, the commandment to " be fruitful and multiply," the perfection of genitalia, and the lack of any commandment for virginity. Her argument is in part a refutation of St. Jerome, who wrote that women should not marry, and in this respect works; but as defense for remarrying after widowhood it is not very convincing. The only woman she mentions who married more than once is the Samaritan woman, and Jesus hardly approved of her multiple marriages. The Wife of Bath knows this; she innocently remarks upon Jesus' words, "' thus he spoke, certainly;/what he meant by it, I cannot say'" (183) and proceeds in her argument. When they support her, Alice quotes authorities, but when they oppose her she dismisses them with a, "' I won't conform to this text/and

rubric one gnat's worth!" (199). Alice manipulates and disregards texts the same way she treats her husbands; she even combines these techniques when accusing her husbands of saying that "there are three things/which trouble all this earth...that a hateful wife is reckoned as one of these misfortunes" and "just as worms destroy a tree/just so a wife destroys her husband" (199). When she uses him as an example, she names Solomon's many wives, but when discrediting him she puts his words into the mouth of her husbands. She employs a similar tactic when explaining the misogyny of Jankin's favorite authors, saying, "the clerk, when he is old, and unable to do/any of Venus' work...writes...that women cannot keep their marriage vows!" (215) She attacks the credibility of these authors or attributes their words to a less credible source; for her favorite sentiments, she even creates sources, claiming that "in the Almagest [Ptolemy] speaks this proverb:/The wisest of all men is he/that never cares who has the world in his hand'" (197). But Chaucer does a similar thing to the Wife of Bath and her satire. By creating a manipulative and biased character, he casts some doubt on her views. The perceived virtue of one of her greatest characteristics, her desire for sex, depends on her current husband's point of view, but her inclinations can be disturbing. At her fourth husband's burial, she says she "acted sorrowful,/as wives must, for it is customary.... but since I was provided with a mate/I wept but little" (209). Her deception does satirize marriage by pointing out how far Alice's emotions differ from the expected grief of a wife, but it also shows a woman entirely unconcerned about her husband's death as long as she is provided for. The man she marries next is Jankin, of whom she said in her tirades, "' I wouldn't want him even if [my husband] died

tomorrow'" (197). Though she lies throughout this speech, the magnitude and unexpectedness of Alice's contradiction mocks her, if only slightly. She falls in love with Jankin as she "[sees] him walk behind the bier" (209) of her last husband. Jankin beats her, but she does not care, because he is good in bed; " in our bed he was so tireless and wanton...that even if he had beaten me on every bone,/he could soon win my love again" (205), she says. Dame Alice's tendency to love men who mistreat her and loathe her " good" (187) husbands solely on the basis of sex creates a disconcerting character.

Despite the fact that she is satirized as a shrew and a woman obsessed with sex, Alice capitalizes on these roles in order to control not only her husbands, but all men, styling herself as an authority on women. "' We women have, to tell the truth,/an odd fancy.... Forbid us a thing, and we will desire it;/press it upon us, and then we will flee'" (205) she says. In context, as Alice describes the husband whom she " loved best because/he was so cool in his love" (205), this appears to mean that women enjoy being neglected, but it has a subtler import too; you cannot force women to do anything, or forbid them anything either. "' Even if you ask Argus...to be my bodyguard...he can't guard me unless I please'" (199) she tells her husbands. She claims that " no man can perjure himself and lie/half so boldly as a woman can" (193) and " God has given women by nature deceit, weeping/and spinning" (201). Though these sayings primarily describe Alice herself, she uses them to intimidate men as a whole, her goal as stated to the Pardoner: for him to " be wary of [marriage]" (191). Her goal is not to portray women positively, but to indicate their power. "' Many a saint...lived always in perfect chastity...let them be white bread...and let us wives be

called barley bread” (189) she says; she would not mind her satirical portrayal; sainthood is not her goal.” Who painted the lion[?]” (213) Alice asks rhetorically, referring to writers who portray women as sinful. She herself is a less than perfect lioness painted by a man, but she tries to create her own image of women in her tale. The Wife of Bath’s tale is a retelling of a King Arthur legend; Alice’s version of the story contains plenty of details supporting her assertions. In this version, the knight sent to discover what women want is not King Arthur but a rapist whose life was spared by the queen and whose answer is weighed not by an evil baron but by women, including widows “ since widows are so wise” (229). The hag this knight is forced to marry gains power by being able to, as she says, “ rectify all this,/if I wanted to...if you behaved yourself to me well” (233) instead of being the victim of a curse. In this story, women want “ to have dominion/over their husbands as well as their lovers” (229), a wish Alice carefully distinguishes from the desire “ to be free, and do just as we please” (225), the wish of women in the original story. Alice emphasizes that “ in all the court there was neither wife nor maiden/nor widow who contradicted what [the knight] said” (229), but the wish is hers, not necessarily womankind’s. The tale’s ending does not bear out Alice’s moral; the knight resigns the choice of whether his wife should be beautiful and possibly unchaste or ugly and chaste to her will because he says, “ I don’t care which of the two I get” (239), flattering his detested and ugly wife with the address, “ my lady and my love, and wife so dear,/I put myself under your wise control” (239). Alice has told us that “ a man can win us best with flattery” (225), a claim the tale confirms. The knight’s wife ends up beautiful and chaste, and “ obey[s] him

in everything/that might give him pleasure or joy” (239), an exact contradiction of the tale’s alleged moral. She shows women to be weak and foolish. Yet Alice herself is neither of these. She is not passive, like the knight’s wife, yet she is at pains to show that women are. She does not consider herself an exception to the general disposition of women; throughout her prologue, as previously mentioned, she makes several statements as to the deviousness of women in general. But once her tale begins, she spends a great deal of time revealing how weak women are; “ if anyone will scratch us/on a sore spot, there is not one of us/who will not kick for being told the truth” (225). She tells the story of Midas, her point being “ we women can’t conceal a thing” (225), for Midas’ wife revealed that her husband had the ears of an ass. Alice knows the story well; she correctly tells the pilgrims to “ read Ovid” (227) if they want to hear the rest. According to Ovid, however, the person who divulged the secret of Midas’ ears was not his wife but his barber, thus undermining the “ point” of the story. Alice realizes that these complaints against women, like her harangues on her husbands, are false; she uses them for an ulterior purpose. The point of her tale is that men should submit to their wives; her example is a wife who obeys her husband although she controls him. By portraying women as weak, she makes submission to a wife seem like hardly a submission at all. Throughout the Wife of Bath’s prologue, it is always good for women to have power. For her first three husbands, she “ brought it about by [her] wit/that they had to give up, as the best thing to do” (201) and though she never quite controls the fourth, she spites him by pretending to have affairs and giving him a cheap burial. Her fifth husband is closest to the knight in the tale; Jankin tells

her, “do as you wish the rest of your life”; “after that day [they] never argued...[she] was as kind to him/as any wife from Denmark to India,/and as true, and so was he to [her]” (219). This is the Wife of Bath’s point, and she makes it in despite of whatever satire is thrown upon her, how contradictory and inaccurate her citations and their uses are, and how unpleasant of a wife she may be. Chaucer both satirizes her and uses her to satirize others, but Alice herself operates in the world of her fellow pilgrims and her own life, and judged on this level, the effectiveness of her argument is beyond reproach.