

The wife of bath: analysis from the biblical viewpoint



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The Bible is an infinitely plastic text. The Wife of Bath illustrates this plasticity by, in effect, reworking Scripture and molding it to fit her specific argument. In an exploration of both the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale and the Tale itself, and through detailed references to the text as well as to Scripture, it will be argued that the Wife is using Old Testament and New Testament texts and values to, essentially, deconstruct the paternalistic Church.

From the very first lines of the Prologue, the Wife of Bath establishes that she will speak from experience and not from authority. Indeed, she keeps her word, for she subsequently inverts, contradicts, and deconstructs established authority, first and foremost being St. Jerome and St. Paul. The Wife recounts St. Jerome's interpretation of the wedding feast Jesus attended in Cana, which he understood to imply, that since Jesus only went to one wedding, then it, surely, follows that, in following Jesus' example, women are only allowed to marry once. The Wife recognizes and adamantly declares the preposterousness of this claim, asserting that nowhere in the Bible is it explicitly stated that women may only marry once. As ridiculous as this argument may sound, it is no less ridiculous that some of the glosses the Wife herself makes on Scripture.

The Wife of Bath is well-versed in Scripture and seems to rather enjoy deconstructing views found in St. Paul's Epistles, and, using them to her own advantage, she interprets St. Paul's advice that women should rule over their husbands' bodies as a way of extracting sexual favors and exercising sovereignty over her husbands. The Wife boldly asks where in the Bible does God forbid marriage or command virginity, knowing fully well that in Paul's

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First Letter to the Corinthians, he “ held virginitee/ Moore parfit than wedding in freltee” (91-92). Yet the Wife goes on to say that Paul merely advised and did not command. The Wife believes that although virginity is more pure than marriage, she prefers marriage, and has a healthy, or perhaps, more than healthy appetite for sex. The Wife further deconstructs this traditional value by asserting the exuberant claim that Christ, too, preferred marriage to virginity by making a reference to the Gospel According to Mark, in which she likens the chaste to bread made of “ pured white seed” and married wives like herself to “ barley-bread,” which is coarser than refined white flour.

Further deconstructing the Gospel, the Wife recounts that Christ chose the coarser bread over the refined bread to feed a crowd of five thousand people, or in her own words, “ to [refresh] many a man, adding an element of sexual innuendo.” (146). What Christ truly believed on the issue of virginity versus marriage is unknown, and the Wife takes advantage of this unknowability to add her own spin to established values found in Scripture, after all, if others like St. Paul and St. Jerome can interpret the Bible, what is to stop the Wife from turning it on its head?

The Wife also declares that “ virginitee is greet perfeccioun,” but adds that Christ did not command perfection of everyone in all other regards, such as poverty, alluding to Matthew 19: 21, in which Jesus warns of the danger of riches and says, “[i]f thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

However, the Wife is not shy about declaring that “ He spak to hem that wol live parfitly, / And lordings, by your leve, that am not !!” (111-112).

Nevertheless, the Wife accepts that marriage may be a less than perfect state, but this assertion does not prevent her from arguing the opposite. Later on, in the Prologue, the Wife employs yet another metaphor to aid in her deconstruction, and argues,

In likening the state of marriage to a wooden vessel as opposed to a golden vessel, which incorporates the ideal of chastity, the Wife asserts that although the vessel may, indeed, be “ of tree” it is nonetheless useful.

The wife again defends her marrying five men by recalling the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians, “ it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor. 7: 9). She declares at various instances throughout the Prologue that the Bible is open to interpretation because it is written, and that which is written needs to be interpreted. Who better to interpret the Bible than the Wife herself, for she claims she has considerable experience.

In his writings, John Milton interprets this particular passage by St. Paul to imply a “ rational burning” that is separate from desire and employs it to argue a case for divorce, thereby reversing the assumed purpose for which Paul wrote. Both Milton and the Wife of Bath are able to deconstruct Judeo-Christian Scripture, “ playing” with words to suit their purposes, thereby implying that if anything can be interpreted in more than one way, then it is not authoritative and, in fact, plastic.

Later in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the Wife recounts a tale that has universal applications because it is set “ many hundred yeres ago” in a “ land fulfild of fairye” (863, 859). By setting the Tale in “ the olde dayes of king Arthour,” the Wife is embarking upon a story in which pagan elements are coupled
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with chivalry and virtuous deeds. In doing so, the Wife is departing from exegesis of Scripture and illustrates, in her Tale, universal truths which are not learned through means of religion, but, rather, through the expression of human nature. Thus, in her Tale, the Wife is diminishing the importance of Scripture and the interpretations of writings by the paternalistic Church by grounding her story not on religion, but on human nature and experience.

The Wife of the Prologue can be argued to represent Fairy Wife of the Tale. In addition, the Tale can be seen as a revisioning of the latter part of the Prologue, in that it is once the men of the Prologue and the Tale confer sovereignty onto their wives that they encounter happiness in marriage. In the Tale, the Wife expounds upon the argument she began in the Prologue, and concludes that it is sovereignty that women most desire, both sovereignty over their husbands, over their bodies, and over themselves: a sovereignty which requires freedom from the authoritative and paternalistic decrees of the male-dominated Church.