

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 misogamist (antimarrriage) 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.

The Wife of Bath’s Tale

Now in the olden days of King Arthur,
 Of whom the Britons speak with great honour,
 All this wide land was land of faery.
 The elf-queen, with her jolly company,
 5 Danced oftentimes on many a green mead;
 This was the old opinion, as I read.
 I speak of many hundred years ago;
 But now no man can see the elves, you know.
 For now the so-great charity and prayers
 10 Of limiters and other holy friars
 That do infest each land and every stream
 As thick as motes are in a bright sunbeam,
 Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies' bowers,
 Cities and towns and castles and high towers,
 15 Manors and barns and stables, aye and dairies-
 This causes it that there are now no fairies.
 For where was wont to walk full many an elf,
 Right there walks now the limiter himself
 In noons and afternoons and in mornings,
 20 Saying his matins and such holy things,
 As he goes round his district in his gown.
 Women may now go safely up and down,
 In every copse or under every tree;
 There is no other incubus, than he,
 25 And would do them nothing but dishonour.
 And so befell it that this King Arthur
 Had at his court a lusty bachelor
 Who, on a day, came riding from river;
 And happened that, alone as she was born,
 30 He saw a maiden walking through the corn,
 From whom, in spite of all she did and said,
 Straightway by force he took her maidenhead;
 For which violation was there such clamour,
 And such appealing unto King Arthur,
 35 That soon condemned was this knight to be dead
 By course of law, and should have lost his head,
 Peradventure, such being the statute then;
 But that the other ladies and the queen
 So long prayed of the king to show him grace,
 40 He granted life, at last, in the law's place,
 And gave him to the queen, as she should will,
 Whether she'd save him, or his blood should spill.
 The queen she thanked the king with all her might,

And after this, thus spoke she to the knight,
 45 When she'd an opportunity, one day:
 "You stand yet," said she, "in such poor a way
 That for your life you've no security.
 I'll grant you life if you can tell to me
 What thing it is that women most desire.
 50 Be wise, and keep your neck from iron dire!
 And if you cannot tell it me anon,
 Then will I give you license to be gone
 A twelvemonth and a day, to search and learn
 Sufficient answer in this grave concern.
 55 And your knight's word I'll have, ere forth you pace,
 To yield your body to me in this place."
 Grieved was this knight, and sorrowfully he sighed;
 But there! he could not do as pleased his pride.
 And at the last he chose that he would wend
 60 And come again upon the twelvemonth's end,
 With such an answer as God might purvey;
 And so he took his leave and went his way.
 He sought out every house and every place
 Wherein he hoped to find that he had grace
 65 To learn what women love the most of all;
 But nowhere ever did it him befall
 To find, upon the question stated here,
 Two, persons who agreed with statement clear.
 Some said that women all loved best riches,
 70 Some said, fair fame, and some said, prettiness;
 Some, rich array, some said 'twas lust abed
 And often to be widowed and re-wed.
 Some said that our poor hearts are aye most eased
 When we have been most flattered and thus pleased
 75 And he went near the truth, I will not lie;
 A man may win us best with flattery;
 And with attentions and with busyness
 We're often limed, the greater and the less.
 And some say, too, that we do love the best
 80 To be quite free to do our own behest,
 And that no man reprove us for our vice,
 But saying we are wise, take our advice.
 For truly there is no one of us all,
 If anyone shall rub us on a gall,
 85 That will not kick because he tells the truth.
 Try, and he'll find, who does so, I say sooth.
 No matter how much vice we have within,
 We would be held for wise and clean of sin.
 And some folk say that great delight have we
 90 To be held constant, also trustworthy,
 And on one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
 And not betray a thing that men may tell.
 But that tale is not worth a rake's handle;
 By God, we women can no thing conceal,
 95 As witness Midas. Would you hear the tale?
 Ovid, among some other matters small,
 Said Midas had beneath his long curled hair,
 Two ass's ears that grew in secret there,
 The which defect he hid, as best he might,

100 Full cunningly from every person's sight,
 And, save his wife, no one knew of it, no.
 He loved her most, and trusted her also;
 And he prayed of her that to no creature
 She'd tell of his disfigurement impure.
 105 She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win
 She would do no such villainy or sin
 And cause her husband have so foul a name;
 Nor would she tell it for her own deep shame.
 Nevertheless, she thought she would have died
 110 Because so long the secret must she hide;
 It seemed to swell so big about her heart
 That some word from her mouth must surely start;
 And since she dared to tell it to no man,
 Down to a marsh, that lay hard by, she ran;
 115 Till she came there her heart was all afire,
 And as a bittern booms in the quagmire,
 She laid her mouth low to the water down:
 "Betray me not, you sounding water blown,"
 Said she, "I tell it to none else but you:
 120 Long ears like asses' has my husband two!
 Now is my heart at ease, since that is out;
 I could no longer keep it, there's no doubt."
 Here may you see, though for a while we bide,
 Yet out it must; no secret can we hide.
 125 The rest of all this tale, if you would hear,
 Read Ovid: in his book does it appear.
 This knight my tale is chiefly told about
 When what he went for he could not find out,
 That is, the thing that women love the best,
 130 Most saddened was the spirit in his breast;
 But home he goes, he could no more delay.
 The day was come when home he turned his way;
 And on his way it chanced that he should ride
 In all his care, beneath a forest's side,
 135 And there he saw, a-dancing him before,
 Full four and twenty ladies, maybe more;
 Toward which dance eagerly did he turn
 In hope that there some wisdom he should learn.
 But truly, ere he came upon them there,
 140 The dancers vanished all, he knew not where.
 No creature saw he that gave sign of life,
 Save, on the greensward sitting, an old wife;
 A fouler person could no man devise.
 Before the knight this old wife did arise,
 145 And said: "Sir knight, hence lies no travelled way.
 Tell me what thing you seek, and by your fay.
 Perchance you'll find it may the better be;
 These ancient folk know many things," said she.
 "Dear mother," said this knight assuredly,
 150 "I am but dead, save I can tell, truly,
 What thing it is that women most desire;
 Could you inform me, I'd pay well your hire."
 "Plight me your troth here, hand in hand," said she,
 "That you will do, whatever it may be,
 155 The thing I ask if it lie in your might;

And I'll give you your answer ere the night."
 "Have here my word," said he. "That thing I grant."
 "Then," said the crone, "of this I make my vaunt,
 Your life is safe; and I will stand thereby,
 160 Upon my life, the queen will say as I.
 Let's see which is the proudest of them all
 That wears upon her hair kerchief or caul,
 Shall dare say no to that which I shall teach;
 Let us go now and without longer speech."
 165 Then whispered she a sentence in his ear,
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.
 When they were come unto the court, this knight
 Said he had kept his promise as was right,
 And ready was his answer, as he said.
 170 Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,
 And many a widow, since they are so wise,
 The queen herself sitting as high justice,
 Assembled were, his answer there to hear;
 And then the knight was bidden to appear.
 175 Command was given for silence in the hall,
 And that the knight should tell before them all
 What thing all worldly women love the best.
 This knight did not stand dumb, as does a beast,
 But to this question presently answered
 180 With manly voice, so that the whole court heard:
 "My liege lady, generally," said he,
 "Women desire to have the sovereignty
 As well upon their husband as their love,
 And to have mastery their man above;
 185 This thing you most desire, though me you kill
 Do as you please, I am here at your will."
 In all the court there was no wife or maid
 Or widow that denied the thing he said,
 But all held, he was worthy to have life.
 190 And with that word up started the old wife
 Whom he had seen a-sitting on the green.
 "Mercy," cried she, "my sovereign lady queen!
 Before the court's dismissed, give me my right.
 'Twas I who taught the answer to this knight;
 195 For which he did plight troth to me, out there,
 That the first thing I should of him require
 He would do that, if it lay in his might.
 Before the court, now, pray I you, sir knight,"
 Said she, "that you will take me for your wife;
 200 For well you know that I have saved your life.
 If this be false, say nay, upon your fay!"
 This knight replied: "Alas and welaway!
 That I so promised I will not protest.
 But for God's love pray make a new request.
 205 Take all my wealth and let my body go."
 "Nay then," said she, "beshrew us if I do!
 For though I may be foul and old and poor,
 I will not, for all metal and all ore
 That from the earth is dug or lies above,
 210 Be aught except your wife and your true love."
 "My love?" cried he, "nay, rather my damnation!

Alas! that any of my race and station
 Should ever so dishonoured foully be!"
 But all for naught; the end was this, that he
 215 Was so constrained he needs must go and wed,
 And take his ancient wife and go to bed.
 Now, peradventure, would some men say here,
 That, of my negligence, I take no care
 To tell you of the joy and all the array
 220 That at the wedding feast were seen that day.
 Make a brief answer to this thing I shall;
 I say, there was no joy or feast at all;
 There was but heaviness and grievous sorrow;
 For privately he wedded on the morrow,
 225 And all day, then, he hid him like an owl;
 So sad he was, his old wife looked so foul.
 Great was the woe the knight had in his thought
 When he, with her, to marriage bed was brought;
 He rolled about and turned him to and fro.
 230 His old wife lay there, always smiling so,
 And said: "O my dear husband, ben'cite!
 Fares every knight with wife as you with me?
 Is this the custom in King Arthur's house?
 Are knights of his all so fastidious?
 235 I am your own true love and, more, your wife;
 And I am she who saved your very life;
 And truly, since I've never done you wrong,
 Why do you treat me so, this first night long?
 You act as does a man who's lost his wit;
 240 What is my fault? For God's love tell me it,
 And it shall be amended, if I may."
 "Amended!" cried this knight, "Alas, nay, nay!
 It will not be amended ever, no!
 You are so loathsome, and so old also,
 245 And therewith of so low a race were born,
 It's little wonder that I toss and turn.
 Would God my heart would break within my breast!"
 "Is this," asked she, "the cause of your unrest?"
 "Yes, truly," said he, "and no wonder 'tis."
 250 "Now, sir," said she, "I could amend all this,
 If I but would, and that within days three,
 If you would bear yourself well towards me.
 "But since you speak of such gentility
 As is descended from old wealth, till ye
 255 Claim that for that you should be gentlemen,
 I hold such arrogance not worth a hen.
 Find him who is most virtuous alway,
 Alone or publicly, and most tries aye
 To do whatever noble deeds he can,
 260 And take him for the greatest gentleman.
 Christ wills we claim from Him gentility,
 Not from ancestors of landocracy.
 For though they give us all their heritage,
 For which we claim to be of high lineage,
 265 Yet can they not bequeath, in anything,
 To any of us, their virtuous living,
 That made men say they had gentility,

And bade us follow them in like degree.
 "Well does that poet wise of great Florence,
 270 Called Dante, speak his mind in this sentence;
 Somewhat like this may it translated be:
 'Rarely unto the branches of the tree
 Doth human worth mount up: and so ordains
 He Who bestows it; to Him it pertains.'
 275 For of our fathers may we nothing claim
 But temporal things, that man may hurt and maim
 "And everyone knows this as well as I,
 If nobleness were implanted naturally
 Within a certain lineage, down the line,
 280 In private and in public, I opine,
 The ways of gentleness they'd alway show
 And never fall to vice and conduct low.
 "Take fire and carry it in the darkest house
 Between here and the Mount of Caucasus,
 285 And let men shut the doors and from them turn;
 Yet will the fire as fairly blaze and burn
 As twenty thousand men did it behold;
 Its nature and its office it will hold,
 On peril of my life, until it die.
 290 "From this you see that true gentility
 Is not allied to wealth a man may own,
 Since folk do not their deeds, as may be shown,
 As does the fire, according to its kind.
 For God knows that men may full often find
 295 A lord's son doing shame and villainy;
 And he that prizes his gentility
 In being born of some old noble house,
 With ancestors both noble and virtuous,
 But will himself do naught of noble deeds
 300 Nor follow him to whose name he succeeds,
 He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
 For acting churlish makes a man a churl.
 Gentility is not just the renown
 Of ancestors who have some greatness shown,
 305 In which you have no portion of your own.
 Your own gentility comes from God alone;
 Thence comes our true nobility by grace,
 It was not willed us with our rank and place
 "Think how noble, as says Valerius,
 310 Was that same Tullius Hostilius,
 Who out of poverty rose to high estate.
 Seneca and Boethius inculcate,
 Expressly (and no doubt it thus proceeds),
 That he is noble who does noble deeds;
 315 And therefore, husband dear, I thus conclude:
 Although my ancestors mayhap were rude,
 Yet may the High Lord God, and so hope I,
 Grant me the grace to live right virtuously.
 Then I'll be gentle when I do begin
 320 To live in virtue and to do no sin.
 "And when you me reproach for poverty,
 The High God, in Whom we believe, say I,
 In voluntary poverty lived His life.

And surely every man, or maid, or wife
 325 May understand that Jesus, Heaven's King,
 Would not have chosen vileness of living.
 Glad poverty's an honest thing, that's plain,
 Which Seneca and other clerks maintain.
 Whoso will be content with poverty,
 330 I hold him rich, though not a shirt has he.
 And he that covets much is a poor wight,
 For he would gain what's all beyond his might,
 But he that has not, nor desires to have,
 Is rich, although you hold him but a knave.
 335 "True poverty, it sings right naturally;
 Juvenal gaily says of poverty:
 'The poor man, when he walks along the way,
 Before the robbers he may sing and play.'
 Poverty's odious good, and, as I guess,
 340 It is a stimulant to busyness;
 A great improver, too, of sapience
 In him that takes it all with due patience.
 Poverty's this, though it seem misery-
 Its quality may none dispute, say I.
 345 Poverty often, when a man is low,
 Makes him his God and even himself to know.
 And poverty's an eye-glass, seems to me,
 Through which a man his loyal friends may see.
 Since you've received no injury from me,
 350 Then why reproach me for my poverty.
 "Now, sir, with age you have upbraided me;
 And truly, sir, though no authority
 Were in a book, you gentles of honour
 Say that men should the aged show favour,
 355 And call him father, of your gentleness;
 And authors could I find for this, I guess.
 "Now since you say that I am foul and old,
 Then fear you not to be made a cuckold;
 For dirt and age, as prosperous I may be,
 360 Are mighty wardens over chastity.
 Nevertheless, since I know your delight,
 I'll satisfy your worldly appetite.
 "Choose, now," said she, "one of these two things, aye,
 To have me foul and old until I die,
 365 And be to you a true and humble wife,
 And never anger you in all my life;
 Or else to have me young and very fair
 And take your chance with those who will repair
 Unto your house, and all because of me,
 370 Or in some other place, as well may be.
 Now choose which you like better and reply."
 This knight considered, and did sorely sigh,
 But at the last replied as you shall hear:
 "My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
 375 I put myself in your wise governing;
 Do you choose which may be the more pleasing,
 And bring most honour to you, and me also.
 I care not which it be of these things two;
 For if you like it, that suffices me."

380 "Then have I got of you the mastery,
Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?"
"Yes, truly, wife," said he, "I hold that best."
"Kiss me," said she, "we'll be no longer wroth,
For by my truth, to you I will be both;
385 That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.
I pray God I go mad, and so declare,
If I be not to you as good and true
As ever wife was since the world was new.
And, save I be, at dawn, as fairly seen
390 As any lady, empress, or great queen
That is between the east and the far west,
Do with my life and death as you like best.
Throw back the curtain and see how it is."
And when the knight saw verily all this,
395 That she so very fair was, and young too,
For joy he clasped her in his strong arms two,
His heart bathed in a bath of utter bliss;
A thousand times, all in a row, he'd kiss.
And she obeyed his wish in everything
400 That might give pleasure to his love-liking.
And thus they lived unto their lives' fair end,
In perfect joy; and Jesus to us send
Meek husbands, and young ones, and fresh in bed,
And good luck to outlive them that we wed.
405 And I pray Jesus to cut short the lives
Of those who'll not be governed by their wives;
And old and querulous niggards with their pence,
And send them soon a mortal pestilence!