

Lecture 6: The Wife of Bath

If the Pardoner is Death, The Good Wif of Bath is Life Abounding, God's grace embodied, most improbably, in a lusty, lustful, loveful widow, a Pilgrim with a Purpose. (Some believe she is satire. Others see her as tragic.)

Some excerpts from the General Prologue:

445: A good wif was ther of biside bathe,

446: But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe. . . .

449: In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon

450: That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;

451: And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she, . . .

456: Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,

457: Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe.

458: Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe.

459: She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:

460: Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,

461: Withouten oother compaignye in youthe, —

462: But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.

463: And thries hadde she been at jersusalem;
464: She hadde passed many a straunge strem; . . .
467: She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.
468: Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye. . . .
474: In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.
475: Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,
476: For she koude of that art the olde daunce.

Where the Pardoner's deepening self-disclosures yield
TRAGIC self-loathing and terror— He is like Milton's
Satan:

[Even] in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threaten[s] to devour [him]. [1

The Wife's self-disclosures engender repeated
affirmations of life.

I see her as a **COMIC** figure because she subverts all of the
vicious stereotypes that would distort and crush her spirit.
She appeals against masculine **AUTHORITY** from her own
feminine **EXPERIENCE**:

What do those terms mean?

Here's how the Wif understands "experience"—of which she has had a good deal:

1: Experience, though noon auctoritee

2: Were in this world, is right ynogh for me

3: To speke of wo that is in mariage;

4: For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,

5: Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,

6: Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve,— . . .

She is also well acquainted with authority, especially the Bible, which she knows remarkably well:

15: Biside a welle, Jesus, God and man,

16: Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan: [2

17: Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,—quod he,

18: —And that ilke man that now hath thee

19: Is noght thyn housbonde, — thus seyde he certeyn.

20: What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;

21: But that I axe, why that the fifthe man

22: Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan? . . .

As a direct consequence of her EXPERIENCE, the Wife discovers, and discloses/exposes, a fundamental self-contradiction in the prime AUTHORITIES of Medieval Civilization: the BIBLE values generation, (pro)creation, fertility; TRADITION venerates Virginitie & Sterility. Reading selectively, the CHURCH emphasizes elements in the Bible that support the traditional understanding.

BUT

Here is what the Bible says about human (pro)creativity:

28: God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;

[Genesis 1:28]

29: That gentil text kan I wel understonde.

30: Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde

31: Sholde lete fader and mooder, and take to me.

[Genesis 2:23-24, Matthew 19:5]

32: But of no nombre mencion made he,

33: Of bigamye, or of octogamye;

34: Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye?

35: Lo, heere the wise kyng, daun Salomon;

[1 Kings 11:3]

What do you remember about Solomon?

36: I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon. [700 + 300]

37: As wolde God it were leveful unto me

38: To be refreshed half so ofte as he!

But Christian TRADITION, esp. in the Middle Ages,
venerates Virginity & Sterility:

105: Virginitie is greet perfeccion, [3

106: And continence eek with devocion, . . .

112:[But] lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.

The Wife's witty conflation and confusion of biblical passages exposes a fundamental inconsistency between monastic/ascetic ideals of virginity and the prime directive of Genesis 1 and 2: "Be fruitful and multiply."

If everyone became a virgin, she observes, there would soon be no more virgins.

In the course of expressing herself, the Wife comes to life in our imagination and becomes larger than life: an image of immense vitality and verve.

In telling us how she manages to “govern” her husbands, the Wif admits, and by admitting demolishes, all the vile diatribes of misogynist discourse, all summed up in an image of woman as the devil:

371: Thou liknest eek wommenes love to helle. [4

She refutes this stereotype by the forthright vitality of her self-disclosure. By inhabiting, incarnating the stereotype, she demolishes it.

Women, we say, are from Venus, Men are from Mars, but the Wif is both:

Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse. (611-12)

The Wif is sometimes seen as a figure of pathos: the husband she loves most turns the tables on her. She gains the upper hand only by chance, when he strikes her so hard that he deafens her and regrets his action.

What is the Wif of Bath’s signature theme?

But her fifth marriage does not exactly illustrate that theme of *maistrye in marriage*;
on the contrary, when her husband yields his authority to her, the sadder but wiser couple achieve, not an inversion of male-female subjugation (as in 3 of her former marriages), but rather a kind of gender equality:

When he says,

deere suster Alisoun,

805: As help me god! I shal thee nevere smyte.

806: That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte.

807: Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke! —

the Wif gains “By maistrye all the soverainetee” (818):

— myn owene trewe wyf,

820: Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;

821: Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat —

822: After that day we hadden never debaat.

823: God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde

824: As any wyf from denmark unto ynde,

825: And also trewe, and so was he to me.

They are healed. Joined together, not as master and slave, but in a kind of partnership.

Given her struggle to sustain life and a measure of freedom in a hostile environment, it is not surprising that the Wife's Tale imagines a better, SUPERNATURAL world by invoking the spirit of romance and fantasy, in a pre-Christian, implicitly Matriarchal Britain:

857: In th' olde dayes of the kyng arthour,
858: Of which that britons speken greet honour,
859: Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
860: The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
861: Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
862: This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
863: I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
864: But now kan no man se none elves mo,
865: For now the grete charitee and prayers
866: Of lymytours and othere hooly freres, . . .
873: For ther as wont to walken was an elf,
874: Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself

This pre-masculine order is violated by a brutal rape. In atonement for his crime, the Knight is sent on a quest To discover:

905: What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.

What do women want?

Do you remember Freud's answer to that question?

Unable to get consistent answers to his question, the knight is desperate; then he encounters an old hag who can and will give him the answer, provided:

1009: Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand, quod she,

1010: The nexte thyng that I requere thee,

1011: Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght,

1012: And I wol telle it yow er it be nyght.

The knight is now able to answer the Queen's question:

1037: My lige lady, generally, quod he,

1038: Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee

1039: As wel over hir housbond as hir love,

1040: And for to been in maistrie hym above.

But when it is time for the Knight to keep his promise, by marrying the old woman, he tries to renege: besides being old, she is poor, and ugly, and base born.

After holding up a glass in which he can see his meager, arrogant self, the woman offers him a choice:

1219: Chese now, quod she, oon of thise thynges tweye:
1220: To han me foul and old til that I deye,
1221: And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
1222: And nevere yow displesse in al my lyf;
1223: Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
1224: And take youre aventure of the repair
1225: That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
1226: Or in som oother place, may wel be.

The resolution of the tale echoes the resolution of the Wife's fifth marriage.

When he is given an "impossible" choice
between having an old & ugly wife who is faithful,
and a young, beautiful wanton,
the Knight allows his Wife to make the choice:

1230: My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
1231: I put me in youre wise governance.

He yields his authority to his wife:

1236: Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie, quod she,
1237: Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?
1238: Ye, certes, wyf, quod he, I holde it best.

This surrender makes it possible for them to live together in bliss:

1239: Kys me, quod she, we be no lenger wrothe;

1240: For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe,

1241: This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.

1242: I prey to God that I moote sterven wood, . . .

1250: And whan the knyght saugh verrailly al this,

1251: That she so fair was, and so yong therto,

1252: For joye he hente hire in his armes two,

1253: His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.

The old/young woman will defy the stereotype by being both chaste and beautiful.

The Beast, nurtured by Beauty, will become a man.

But the nature of the Wif's fantasy is a bit puzzling.

The hero is a brutal, arrogant, wholly selfish rapist; incapable of gratitude—a dead loss, the Brits would say.

Why is the Witchy Woman in the tale, or the Wife herself, interested in such a poor specimen of Humanity?

That's another version of the Queen's QUESTION:

What does a Woman Want?

I won't pretend I'm wise enough to answer that question
—except with a question: What does a Man Want?—

But I have 2 suggestions:

1) If you want to know what a woman wants, Ask Her.

2) And if you're puzzled by the unearned benefits (or
GRACE) bestowed upon such an unworthy object,
remember: A Good Man is Very Hard to Find.

NOTES

1] *Paradise Lost* IV. 76-77

2] The reference is to the bold Samaritan woman in John 4:6 ff. But the Samaritan in the well known parable in Luke (10:25-37) is the only person who shows compassion for the man fallen among thieves.

3] See 1 Corinthians 7:25 ff. The Wife seems to confuse Paul's preference for the single life with Jesus's exhortations to live in poverty (which she also twists to accommodate her own privileged social status):

107: But crist, that of perfeccion is welle,

108: Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle

109: Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore

110: And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore. Matthew 19:21

111: He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly;

112: And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.

4] According to Saint Augustine (explaining Samson's visit to a harlot in Gaza: *Sermon de Samsonē, Patrologia Latinae*, XXXIX, 1642), *Infernum et amorem mulieris, utrumque Scriptura conjugit*: Hell and the love of woman, Scripture everywhere joins together. According to a popular proverb, *Foemina Diabolo tres assibus est mala peior*: A bad woman is three times (or only three bits) worse than the Devil.