

The Portrait of the Wife of Bath

From *The General Prologue*, lines 447–78

A good WIF was ther OF biside BATHE,
 But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe.
 Of clooth-making she hadde swich an haunt,
 She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt. 450
 In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon
 That to the offringe bifore hire sholde goon;
 And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
 That she was out of alle charitee.
 Hir coverchiefs ful fine weren of ground;
 I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound
 That on a Sunday weren upon hir heed.
 Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
 Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moiste and newe.
 Bould was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe. 460
 She was a worthy womman al hir live:
 Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five,
 Withouten oother compaignye in youthe, –
 But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.
 And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
 She hadde passed many a straunge strem;
 At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
 In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
 She koude muchel of wandringe by the weye.
 Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye. 470
 Upon an amblere esily she sat,
 Ywimpled wel, and on hir heed an hat
 As brood as is a bokeler or a targe;
 A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,
 And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.

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In felawshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.
Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

'Experience, though noon auctoritee
 Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
 To speke of wo that is in mariage;
 For, lordinges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
 Thonked be God that is eterne on live,
 Housbondes at chirche dore I have had five –
 If I so ofte mighte have ywedded bee –
 And alle were worthy men in hir degree.
 But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is,
 That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but onis 10
 To wedding, in the Cane of Galilee,
 That by the same ensample taughte he me
 That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.
 Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones,
 Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,
 Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:
 "Thou hast yhad five housbondes," quod he,
 "And that ilke man that now hath thee
 Is noght thyn housbonde," thus seyde he certeyn.
 What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn; 20
 But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
 Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
 How manye mighte she have in mariage?
 Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age
 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.
 Men may devine and glosen, up and doun,
 But wel I woot, expres, withoute lie,
 God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;
 That gentil text kan I wel understonde.
 Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde 30
 Sholde lete fader and mooder, and take to me.

But of no nombre mencion made he,
 Of bigamie, or of octogamie;
 Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynie?
 Lo, heere, the wise king, daun Salomon;
 I trowe he hadde wives mo than oon.
 As wolde God it were levelful unto me
 To be refreshed half so ofte as he!
 Which yifte of God hadde he for alle his wives!
 No man hath swich that in this world alive is. 40
 God woot, this noble king, as to my wit,
 The firste night had many a mirie fit
 With ech of hem, so wel was him on live.
 Yblessed be God that I have wedded five!
 Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal.
 For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al.
 Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon,
 Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon,
 For thanne, th'apostle seith that I am free
 To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me. 50
 He seith that to be wedded is no sinne;
 Bet is to be wedded than to brinne.
 What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynie
 Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamie?
 I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man,
 And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan;
 And ech of hem hadde wives mo than two,
 And many another holy man also.
 Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,
 That hye God defended mariage 60
 By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me.
 Or where comanded he virginitee?
 I woot as wel as ye, it is no drede,
 Th'apostel, whan he speketh of maidenhede,
 He seyde that precept therof hadde he noon.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

Men may conseille a womman to been oon,
 But conseilling is no comandement.
 He putte it in oure owene juggement;
 For hadde God comanded maidenhede,
 Thanne hadde he dampned wedding with the dede. 70
 And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,
 Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?
 Poul dorste nat comanden, atte leeste,
 A thing of which his maister yaf noon heeste.
 The dart is set up for virginitee:
 Cacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see.
 But this word is nat taken of every wight,
 But ther as God lust give it of his might.
 I woot wel that th'apostel was a maide;
 But nathelees, thogh that he wroot and saide 80
 He wolde that every wight were swich as he,
 Al nis but conseil to virginitee.
 And for to been a wyf he yaf me leve
 Of indulgence; so nis it no repreve
 To wedde me, if that my make die,
 Withouten excepcion of bigamie.
 Al were it good no womman for to touche, —
 He mente as in his bed or in his couche;
 For peril is bothe fyr and tow t'assemble:
 Ye knowe what this ensample may resemble. 90
 This is al and som, he heeld virginitee
 Moore parfit than wedding in freletee.
 Freletee clepe I, but if that he and she
 Wolde leden al hir lyf in chastitee.
 I graunte it wel, I have noon envie,
 Thogh maidenhede preferre bigamie.
 It liketh hem to be clene, body and goost;
 Of myn estaat I nil nat make no boost.
 For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,

He nath nat every vessel al of gold; 100
 Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servise.
 God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wise,
 And everich hath of God a propre yifte,
 Som this, som that, as him liketh shifte.
 Virginitee is greet perfeccion,
 And continence eek with devocion,
 But Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,
 Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle
 Al that he hadde, and give it to the poore
 And in swich wise folwe him and his foore. 110
 He spak to hem that wolde live parfitly;
 And Lordinges, by youre leve, that am nat I.
 I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
 In the actes and in fruit of mariage.
 Telle me also, to what conclusion
 Were membres maad of generacion,
 And of so parfit wys a wight ywroght?
 Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght.
 Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and down,
 That they were maked for purgacioun 120
 Of urine, and oure bothe thinges smale
 Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
 And for noon oother cause, – say ye no?
 The experience woot wel it is noght so.
 So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,
 I sey this, that they maked ben for bothe,
 This is to seye, for office, and for ese
 Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese.
 Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette
 That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette? 130
 Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement,
 If he ne used his sely instrument?
 Thanne were they maad upon a creature

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To purge urine, and eek for engendrure.

But I seye noght that every wight is holde,
 That hath swich harneys as I to yow tolde,
 To goon and usen hem in engendrure.
 Thanne sholde men take of chastitee no cure.
 Crist was a maide, and shapen as a man,
 And many a seint, sith that the world bigan; 140
 Yet lived they evere in parfit chastitee.
 I nil envye no virginitee.

Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
 And lat us wives hoten barly-breed;
 And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,
 Oure Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man.
 In swich estaat as God hath cleped us
 I wol persevere; I nam nat precius.
 In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument
 As frely as my Makere hath it sent. 150

If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
 Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,
 Whan that him list come forth and paye his dette.
 An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
 Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
 And have his tribulacion withal
 Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf.
 I have the power duringe al my lyf
 Upon his propre body, and noght he.
 Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me; 160
 And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.
 Al this sentence me liketh every deel.'

Up stirte the Pardoner, and that anon:
 'Now, dame,' quod he, 'by God and by Seint John!
 Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.
 I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas,
 What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere?

Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!
 'Abide!' quod she, 'my tale is nat bigonne.
 Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tonne, 170
 Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.
 And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale
 Of tribulacion in mariage,
 Of which I am expert in al myn age –
 This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe –
 Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe
 Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.
 Be war of it, er thou to ny approche;
 For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.
 "Whoso that nil be war by othere men, 180
 By him shul othere men corrected be."
 The same wordes writeth Ptholomee;
 Rede in his Almageste, and take it there.'
 'Dame, I wolde praye yow, if youre wil it were,'
 Seyde this Pardoner, 'as ye bigan,
 Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man,
 And teche us 'yonge men of youre praktike.'
 'Gladly,' quod she, 'sith it may yow like;
 But that I praye to al this compaignie,
 If that I speke after my fantasie, 190
 As taketh not agrief of that I seye;
 For myn entente is nat but for to pleye.
 Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale.
 As evere moote I drinken wyn or ale,
 I shal seye sooth, tho housbondes that I hadde,
 As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.
 The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;
 Unnethe mighte they the statut holde
 In which that they were bounden unto me.
 Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee. 200
 As help me God, I laughe whan I thinke

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How pitously a-night I made hem swinke!
 And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.
 They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
 Me neded nat do lenger diligence
 To winne hir love, or doon hem reverence.
 They loved me so wel, by God above,
 That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love.
 A wys womman wol bisie hire evere in oon
 To gete hir love, ye, ther as she hath noon. 210
 But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
 And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
 What sholde I taken keep hem for to plesse,
 But it were for my profit and myn ese?
 I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,
 That many a night they songen “weilaway!”
 The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,
 That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe.
 I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
 That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe 220
 To bringe me gaye thinges fro the faire.
 They were ful glad whan I spak to hem faire;
 For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously.
 Now herkneth hou I baar me proprely,
 Ye wise wives, that kan understonde.
 Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde;
 For half so boldely kan ther no man
 Swere and lyen, as a womman kan.
 I sey nat this by wives that been wise,
 But if it be whan they hem misavise. 230
 A wys wyf shal, if that she kan hir good,
 Bere him on honde that the cow is wood,
 And take witnesse of hir owene maide
 Of hir assent; but herkneth how I saide:
 “Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?

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Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?
 She is honoured over al ther she gooth;
 I sitte at hoom, I have no thrifty clooth.
 What dostow at my neighebores hous?
 Is she so fair? artow so amorous? 240
 What rowne ye with oure maide? *Benedicite!*
 Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be.
 And if I have a gossib or a freend,
 Withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend,
 If that I walke or pleye unto his hous.
 Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous,
 And prechest on thy bench, with ivel preef!
 Thou seist to me it is a greet meschief
 To wedde a povre womman, for costage;
 And if that she be riche, of heigh parage, 250
 Thanne seistow that it is a tormentrie
 To soffre hire pride and hire malencolie.
 And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,
 Thou seist that every holour wol hire have;
 She may no while in chastitee abide,
 That is assailed upon ech a side.

Thou seist som folk desiren us for richesse,
 Somme for oure shap, and somme for oure fairnesse,
 And som for she kan outhur singe or daunce,
 And som for gentillesse and daliaunce; 260
 Som for hir handes and hir armes smale:
 Thus goth al to the devel, by thy tale.
 Thou seist men may nat kepe a castel wal,
 It may so longe assailed been overal.

And if that she be foul, thou seist that she
 Coveiteth every man that she may se,
 For as a spaynel she wol on him lepe,
 Til that she finde som man hire to chepe.
 Ne noon so grey goos gooth ther in the lake