

# RECONCILING PHILOSOPHY AND REALITY THROUGH THE WIFE OF BATH'S UNORTHODOX APPROACH TO THE MARRIAGE DEBATE

Olivia Fuson  
Creighton University

A staple of medieval English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* remains relevant after so many years due to its discourse on fundamental social issues, its cutting satire, and its striking characters. Perhaps the most memorable of these characters is one whose discourse is particularly relevant today in an era of constantly redefined gender roles: the Wife of Bath. This outspoken dame takes center stage in the marriage cycle of the *Tales* and is one of the first female characters in English literature to question a woman's place in society and in marriage. Using her wit and her personal experience, the Wife of Bath is able to bring women's issues to the forefront of an otherwise male-dominated discussion, but her contribution to Chaucer's magnum opus does not end there. Through the unusual and often unorthodox debating techniques that the Wife of Bath employs, Chaucer questions the value of traditional, academic philosophy divorced from experience, and demonstrates that philosophy is of greater value when it draws from and is able to influence one's personal experience – even mundane or base experience – than it is in the ethereal realm of academia where a degenerate scholasticism came to reside.

A lurid woman, the Wife of Bath characterizes herself as a worldly character with her very first appearance in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*. Through the narrator's description of this lady as decked in red from her head covering to her hose, Chaucer marks her as both loud and slightly impetuous with this choice of coloring. The addition of a pair of spurs to her boots

completes the picture of a woman who is not afraid to take life by the horns. Chaucer writes of her ability to manage her relationships: "Of remedies of love she knew par chance/For she koude of that art the olde daunce."<sup>1</sup> Attributing wisdom about matters of love to the Wife of Bath and lauding her skills in "all the old tricks," Chaucer intimates that she is well equipped to manipulate the relationships she enters into to her own advantage. Indeed, as Robert Raymo suggests, linking Alice's knowledge of the remedies of love and her recent loss of a husband to Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* which encourages the broken hearted to take long voyages, the Wife may be attempting to drown her sorrows (or secure a new husband) on this very pilgrimage<sup>2</sup>. She is certainly a well-seasoned traveler as well as lover, our narrator tells us, as "thries hadde she been at Jerusalem,"<sup>3</sup> as well as Rome, Bolonie, Galice and Coloine, and five times to the church-door to marry a new husband. The Wife not only knows the "old daunce" of love, the narrator reminds us, but she is a prudent woman capable of managing practical matters such as independent travel, as well. Her savvy in real world matters such as those of marriage and travel gives the Wife of Bath an air of cunning or street-smarts which contributes heavily to her ability to implement her philosophy of female dominance in marriage, especially when coupled with the symbolic spurs which suggest that her cunning does not go to waste but does, in fact, allow her to enact her will.

In the Prologue to her specific tale, the reader gains a fuller understanding of the Wife of Bath's philosophy and sees her put it to use in her manipulation of her first three husbands, as she recalls:

A wis woman wol bisye hire evere in oon  
 To gete hir love, ye, theras she hath noon.  
 But sith I hadde hem hoolly in min hond,  
 And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,  
 What sholde I taken kepe hem for to plese,

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Penguin, 2005), 475-76.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Raymo, "The General Prologue," pp. 1-86 of Correale, Robert M. and Hamel, Mary eds. *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Chaucer, 463.

But it were for my profit and min ese?<sup>4</sup>

Explaining first how she earned the love of her elderly husbands and convinced them to give her all their land—a cunning move to begin with—the Wife of Bath then shows true expediency in implementing her ideal of female dominance in ceasing to please her husbands after their capitulation. Expressing cold realities such as that wives only seek to please their husbands when they feel unloved and, once they have them in hand see no further point to gaining their affections, the Wife of Bath simultaneously satirizes the medieval philosophical ideal of marriage and reveals her expedient approach to the institution. Her judicious pursuit of dominance in her marriage, as well as the calculating logic she employs to attain her goal is a perfect juxtaposition to the ideal medieval wife: a patient, obsequious, delicate creature willing to defer to her husband’s superior rationality in all cases. Coupled with her ruthless pursuit of dominance, the Wife’s actions in her first three marriages satirize the depiction of women as innocent and subservient and establish dame Alice’s true enterprising spirit as a direct contrast to this “ideal.” Trevor Whittock points out in his article *The Marriage Cycle*, “Indeed, what better vehicle for the satire could there be than the comic, guilt-free, indignant Wife of Bath! Again and again, with devastating common-sense she upturns official morality.”<sup>5</sup> There is power in this common-sense, too, as Chaucer reveals through the rewards the Wife of Bath reaps due to her manipulation of her husbands, contrary to the prevailing moral code. Thus, after both the General Prologue and her own Prologue, the reader cannot help being convinced of the practical value of the Wife of Bath’s particular brand of philosophy despite the fact that it does, as Whittock points out, contradict “official morality” or, more aptly, traditional moral philosophy.

In addition to contradicting traditional moral philosophy with her actions, the Wife of Bath goes one step further and even has the audacity to pit her shrewd, enterprising ideals against accepted authorities of moral debate. Unlike the Clerk or the Monk, she has been denied official schooling. Instead, she relies on experience to

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-214.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Whittock, “The Marriage Debate. I,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 14 (1960): 58.

shape her opinion—an opinion which is of greater worth than that which is based solely on book learning if you ask her. She explains her credentials to discourse on the topic of marriage: “Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right inogh for me/To speke of wo that is in marriage.”<sup>6</sup> From the opening lines of her prologue, the Wife of Bath begins to discredit traditional academic authority as she argues that experience, though not a traditional moral authority does, in fact, qualify her to discourse on the topic of marriage. While the argument that experience is a type of authority in itself may have been difficult to pitch in regard to any other subject, certainly the Wife of Bath’s medieval audience would have had to agree that marriage was one of the subjects that authority frequently got wrong. As Mary Carruthers points out, “The practical bourgeois wife clearly contradicted the idealized image of the subservient wife held up as a model by “gentility” and by the church.”<sup>7</sup> Carruthers even goes on to point out how the falsities within the department books of the time—medieval How-To guides for marriage—made authority even less credible on the subject of marriage. She writes, “In view of such discrepancies between medieval theory and medieval practice, one must be careful about accepting the department books as authorities on what was actually anticipated in a medieval marriage.”<sup>8</sup> Capitalizing on her audience’s own experience of the discrepancies between actual practice and academic authority on the subject of marriage, the Wife of Bath ingeniously depicts her own philosophy of marriage as more credible than the moral theories that her audience knows are inaccurate. Thus, raising the point that the Wife of Bath’s experience of marriage is indubitably more accurate and pertinent to society than the moral theorizing of the Clerk, Chaucer begins to chip away at the value of established moral doctrine and legitimize the Wife of Bath’s experience-based philosophical opinion.

Further endorsing the value of the Wife’s experience-based opinion, Chaucer also demonstrates how, despite her lack of formal academic education, the Wife of Bath does address crucial

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<sup>6</sup> Chaucer, “Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” 1-3.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions,” *PMLA*, vol. 94, no. 2 (1979): 213.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

philosophical questions about a wife's role in marriage through her own unorthodox style of debate. Describing the philosophical differences she had with her fourth husband, the Wife of Bath lays out her opponent's arguments clearly and succinctly. She denounces one of his opinions, saying, "Thow seyst we wives wil oure vices hide/Til we be fast, and thane we wol hem shewe./Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewe!"<sup>9</sup> Using a classic debater's move, the Wife of Bath lists off a litany of her husband's beliefs in this fashion, calling them ridiculous or ill-conceived as she does so. As in this example, however, due to her lack of formal training in disputation, her denunciations of these opinions are often unsupported and, while in some cases (such as the one above) her attacks do find purchase, they generally do not contain evidence or substance. Although this debate concludes without any decisive conclusion from either party, however, the Wife of Bath does succeed in championing one aspect of her cause. One of the chief tenets of her philosophy, as Kenneth Oberent points out, is that "The conventional belief that man has a stronger propensity toward Reason than woman and the subsequent claim that men deserve to be women's masters Dame Alice has tested upon her own pulses and found to be wanting."<sup>10</sup> Engaging her misogynistic husband in debate and making him out to be at least (if not more) ridiculous than she, Alice decries the above-mentioned conviction and, since her opinion is backed by the legitimacy of experience, her audience must at the very least consider its legitimacy. In bringing many of the stereotypes of women to light in this comic debate, the Wife of Bath is inviting her audience to attempt to discredit them for themselves, delving deeper into their own philosophical beliefs about the nature of wives and women in general.

Another instance in which the Wife of Bath's unconventional method of debate succeeds in raising important philosophical questions about the institution of marriage is in her debate with her fifth husband, Jenkin. Predicated upon her habit of exercising her liberty to leave the house and go on calls without her husband's consent, this disagreement is over the character of women and their inclination towards vice. Jenkin, the clerk she is wed to, attempts to

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<sup>9</sup> Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Prologue," 282-284.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Oberent, "Chaucer's Anti-Misogynist Wife of Bath," *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1976): 294.

lecture her on the history of wicked women, reading from a book of the history of all bad wives. The Wife of Bath tells:

Then upon a night, Jankin, that was oure sire  
Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire  
Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse  
Was al mankind ybrought to wrechednesse...  
Lo here, expres of wimmen a ye finde,  
That woman was the los of al mankinde!<sup>11</sup>

Once again, Chaucer satirizes misogyny through the outrage of the Wife of Bath. As in her disagreement with her first husband, the Wife of Bath is irate to find such pejorative depictions of her sex. Her outrage does succeed in satirizing the absurdity of these prejudices – it is, of course, a classic fallacy to blame women for the loss of mankind (a fallacy which the God of Genesis points out in the original biblical story) – but she does not go so far as to discredit Jenkin’s erroneous manipulation of this text. Left with no formal debating skills to combat a trained clerk in the field of rhetoric, the Wife of Bath must stage the argument on different grounds if she is to secure a level playing field. Instead of continuing this debate academically, then, she instead turns to physicality, recalling, “Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke/I with my fist so took him on the cheke.”<sup>12</sup> While her methods are unorthodox, they are certainly effective. Not only does the Wife of Bath “win” the debate between her and Jenkin through this physicality and her ensuing ruse of pretending to be dead, but she also suggests to her listeners that her side is the moral one. Physical sparring has long been a metaphor for debate and, in turning a philosophical debate into a fist fight in which she comes out on top, the Wife of Bath portrays her side of this argument as the winning one without the use of traditional rhetoric. Capitalizing on Jenkin’s guilt at having knocked her to the ground with a book, Alice is able to secure more freedom from her husband at the conclusion of this debate. The freedom is one victory for the Wife, but the guilt itself is another one. For, in forcing Jenkin to show contrition, the Wife illustrates that he occupied an erroneous position in the first place, not

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<sup>11</sup> Chaucer, “Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” 714-720.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 791-92.

only in deed but in his philosophy, as well. In this debate, not only has she succeeded in posing a philosophical question about the nature of women but, with her clear indication of who should win this debate, she has answered the question, as well. All that is left is for the readers to supply the moral arguments to support the predetermined outcome. For, if the Wife of Bath's argument can triumph over the misogynistic Jenkin (albeit through unorthodox means), then surely the more liberal-minded pilgrims/readers will side with her, as well.

In addition to the satire of her overtly misogynistic husbands, the Wife of Bath's use of unconventional debating tactics adds another element of satire to her story as Chaucer confronts his readers with the truth that, regardless of the moral vacillations of scholars, social issues in the real world are seldom decided by logical debate. Alice describes how she settles the debate with her fourth husband, writing, "I wolde no lenger in the bed abide,/If that I felte his arm over my side,/Til he hadde maad his raunceon unto me;/Thanne wolde I suffer him do his nicetee"<sup>13</sup> It is sex, and not philosophy or logic which subdues her fourth husband, and the tools she wields to triumph over Jenkin are not much more sophisticated. Hitting Jenkin and then pretending to be dead after he retaliates, she uses his guilt to get her way. Bartering her way to victory in the debate with her fourth husband and playing upon Jenkin's emotions (albeit warranted ones) in their debate, the Wife of Bath seizes some sort of emotional power to win both logical debates. "Shrewishness has been her typical method of reforming her wayward husbands, not the sweet reasonableness of Dame Prudence of the Tale of Melibee or the patient steadfastness of Grisilde of the Clerk's Tale," Oberembt tells us.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the comparison between the fictitious two paragons of female virtue and the realistic Dame Alice further evidences the fact that the Wife of Bath's philosophy is of greater use than the moral authority which the Clerk or her two later husbands draw upon, as it is Dame Alice who ends with the upper hand in both of these instances of real-world debate. Chronicling Alice's many triumphs in her marriages, Chaucer illustrates that there is more than one way to win a debate. Experience and expediency, he demonstrates, are tools as worthy as

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 409-412.

<sup>14</sup> Oberembt, 301.

book learning or formal rhetoric when debating in the real world: perhaps even more so, if we consider Dame Alice's success.

Chaucer compounds this point in the tale the Wife of Bath tells, illustrating the importance of action and experience once more in the debate between the Knight and the old Crone as to the nature of "gentillesse." The Knight, who was tasked with answering the question of "what do women want most in marriage?" as his sentence for having raped a maiden, succeeds in learning the answer from an old Crone but with one condition: that he marry the old Woman. The arrogant young Knight balks, however, when it comes time for him to hold up his end of the bargain. He bemoans his situation, complaining, "Thow art so loothly, and so old also,/ And thereto comen of so lowe a kinde,/ That litel wonder is htogh I walwe and winde."<sup>15</sup> Despite the Knight's assertion of accepted societal standards (such as that one's family heritage determines one's nobility), the old Woman is unwilling to concede her right to his hand. She asserts her position, framing it in the form of a rhetorical argument, and cows him into logical submission, replying:

Looke who that is moost vertuouse alway,  
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay  
To do the gentil dedes that he kan;  
Taak hym for the grettest gentil man.  
Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,  
Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse.  
For thogh they yeve us al hir heritage,  
For which we clayme to been of heigh parage,  
Yet may they nat biquethe for no thyng  
To noon of us hir vertuouse lyvyng,  
That made hem gentil men ycalled be,  
And bad us folwen hem in swich degree.<sup>16</sup>

The old Woman's use of a counter-argument, consistent with traditional debater's style and drawing from established religious authority, furthers the Wife of Bath's philosophy in two ways. Firstly, in chronicling a debate in which a woman wins through logical

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<sup>15</sup> Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Tale," 1100-1102.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1115-1124.

argument (as the Knight does eventually marry the old Woman and defer to her authority, besides) Alice's tale supports her contention that men are not inherently rationally superior. Secondly, in grounding her interpretation of the traditional value of *gentillesse* in action and experience, the old Woman serves as yet another example of the value of said experience. Arguing that *gentillesse* is not derived from noble birth but from the noble actions of individuals which allow them to claim virtue in the eyes of Christ, the old Woman asserts the value of action over abstract ideology. In further support of her argument, she then grounds her ideal of "gentillesse" in personal experience, appealing to one's tendency to look to men who perform good deeds as the greatest gentlemen (not necessarily to men of noble birth). Contending that actions, rather than noble birth, confer "gentillesse" and grounding that argument in the personal experience of forming opinions of others based on their actions as opposed to their station, the old Woman once again shows the value of experience within the realm of debate. Demonstrating both women's rationality and the value of experience over pure ideology in this debate, Dame Alice uses her story to validate her experience-based philosophy.

She even goes as far to suggest that her brand of philosophy may be of greater value than that of isolated idealism, showing how, even when morality does appear to influence societal outcomes, it often does so as a guise for latent practicality. When telling the story of the wayward Knight, the Wife of Bath structures this tale as one of an immoral man seeking redemption. The immoral Knight, who has raped a maiden and now must answer the question "what do all women want in marriage" or be put to death, embarks on a quest to find this answer. He eventually strikes a deal with an old Crone in which she provides the answer and he agrees to marry her in exchange. He marries the Crone unwillingly but, when she offers him the choice between having her young and unfaithful or old and loyal, it seems he has learned to respect women's autonomy when he replies:

My lady and my love, and wif so deere,  
I putte me in youre wise governaunce.  
Cheeseh yourself which may be moost lesaunce,

And moost honour to yow and me also.<sup>17</sup>

While the Wife of Bath intends to show that the Knight has learned to submit to the governance of his wife, Chaucer the author, ever the master of ambiguity, leaves it open to interpretation as to whether this transformation is genuine or not. The subsequent reaction of the Woman in granting him both her youthful form and loyalty leaves the possibility that the Knight's servility was a manipulation of his wife. While it is certainly possible that the Knight's transformation was genuine, it is equally possible that it was not. With this ambiguity, Chaucer has called into question the one purely moral, rhetorical victory in either the Wife's Prologue or Tale. Leaving the possibility that the Knight "won" this debate through a manipulation of his wife, Chaucer once again intimates that logic and rhetoric are not the only weapons available in instances of real-world debate, but that expediency plays a role as well. With one stroke of the pen, he has both raised an important philosophical question about the structure of marriage while simultaneously questioning the outcome of that very debate, as morality itself is not the only factor in determining societal outcomes so long as action and expediency are also available means of winning a debate.

Addressing the philosophical issue of marriage while simultaneously decrying the value of this philosophical enquiry on its own, Chaucer uses satire in the prologue and tale of the Wife of Bath to argue that philosophy is only relevant if one can reconcile it with reality. Framing the Wife of Bath's tale as a rebuttal against the book-learning of the Clerk and other academicians of the time, Chaucer extols the power of the Wife's realistic philosophy of marriage as at least equal to that of the traditional, moral philosophy of academia through the triumphs of the pragmatic Dame Alice. Time and time again the audience sees the Wife of Bath's practical philosophy of marriage serve her well in both her real life and in moral debate. She easily implements her philosophy to triumph over her first three husbands, and triumphs over the second two through some form of debate (unorthodox or not). Ever a master of layering and irony, Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath's tale to two ends: first, to encourage

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1230-1234.

his readers to consider the philosophical issue of marriage and, second, to examine the value of philosophy in general. Far too often we get caught up in moral and theoretical debate without stopping to consider how the teachings of this debate can impact our daily lives. An issue is only worth pursuing logically, Chaucer cautions us, if we are willing to implement our conclusions into reality – a task easier said than done, if the Wife of Bath’s approach to moral debate is any indication.

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