**The Wife of Bath in Context: Medieval Views of Marriage**

**In emagazine 48, Malcolm Hebron considered different ways of reading the ‘character’ of the Wife of Bath. Here he returns to the writings on marriage that Chaucer himself he would have known.**

The Wife talks undertakes ‘To speke of wo that is in mariage’. To get a better understanding of what she says, and how it might have been viewed by Chaucer’s audience, we need to know something about the traditional Christian teachings on marriage, and about the ideas on the subject of Chaucer’s time.

**Diverse ideas**

There was no one universally accepted medieval view of what marriage was, and what it was for. Was it chiefly to contain lust, or for mutual help between the partners, or to make children?

**The Bible**

The ultimate authorities were the Scriptures, and these are open to different interpretations.

**Old Testament: The Creation of Man and Woman**

There are two Creation stories in Genesis. Each is by a different writer, and suggests a slightly different view of the relations between man and woman, which I add after the text.

**1.            Genesis 1.27-28 (First Creation story)**

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.  28 And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the bird of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

* *Man and woman are equals, because they are both created in God’s image.*
* *Marriage is chiefly for procreation: ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (referred to by the Wife, lines 26-28, though many of her quotations are taken from Jerome).*

**2.            Genesis 2.18  (Second Creation story)**

18 Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him.’

* *The companionship of woman perfects man’s social nature. He is not complete without her.*
* *The union of man and woman is part of the goodness of the created world*.

**Genesis 2.21-24 [In verses 19-20 Adam names the animals]**

21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; 22 and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,             ‘This at last is bone of my bones                         and flesh of my flesh;             She shall be called Woman,                         because she was taken out of Man.’ 24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

* *This again shows the equality of man and woman: Eve is taken from Adam’s rib (the centre of his body), not from the head or foot, which would show dominance or subservience. One strand of medieval thought did in fact hold that God created man and woman as equals.*
* *Man and woman are perfectly united as one flesh.*

**The New Testament: St Paul**

Christ provides no clear teaching on marriage, so this had to be developed by his followers. St Paul (c.5BC – c.67 AD) establishes the fundamental Christian teachings on the subject in his letters to the first Christian communities. The two principal texts are The First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 7 and Ephesians, Chapter 5.

**1 Corinthians 7**

In this letter, St Paul repeatedly states his belief that virginity is superior to marriage (1, 7-8, 26-40), Marriage is worldly and is a distraction from the Christian’s task of saving his soul. However, marriage may be necessary to contain lust: ‘Better be married than burn with vain desire’ (9).

In a marriage, both partners have duties to the other:

The husband must give the wife what is due to her, and the wife equally must give the husband his due. The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband’s. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife’s. (3-4)

The Wife is fond of the first part of this text (see lines 158-62) but she conveniently ignores the instruction to ‘give the husband his due’ – a clear case of selective quotation.  1 Corinthians 11.3

A little later, the sovereignty of man over woman is affirmed:

But I wish you to understand that, while every man has Christ for his Head, woman’s head is man, as Christ’s Head is God.

**Ephesians 5**

In this letter, St Paul develops this comparison of husband and wife to the relation of Christ to the Church. The husband has sovereignty over the wife, but he also has a duty to love and care for her.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ also is the head of the church. Christ is, indeed, the Saviour of the body; but just as the church is subject to Christ, so must women be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for it, to consecrate it, cleansing it by water and word, so that he might present the church to himself all glorious, with no stain or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and without blemish. In the same way men also are bound to love their wives, as they love their own bodies. In loving his wife a man loves himself. For no one ever hated his own body: on the contrary, he provides and cares for it; and that is how Christ treats the church, because it is his body, of which we are living parts. Thus it is that (in the words of Scripture) ‘a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become a single body’. It is a great truth that is hidden here. I for my part refer it to Christ and to the church, but it applies also individually: each of you must love his wife as his very self; and the woman must see to it that she pays her husband all respect. (22-33)

*The main points of the two texts by St Paul taken together are:*

* *Virginity is a superior state to marriage*
* *Marriage serves for the containment of lust*
* *Husbands and wives own one another’s bodies*
* *Marriage is analogous to the relation of Christ and his Church*
* *The husband has sovereignty over the wife*
* *Wives must obey their husbands (thus, obedience is one of the qualities that perfects woman)*
* *Husbands must love, provide and care for their wives*

*The texts of Genesis and St Paul present a clear conflict between marriage as a partnership of equals and as an institution in which the man is dominant. The Wife presents another picture – an institution in which the woman is dominant: does this lead to happiness? She says that when her last husband gave in, ‘After that day we hadden never debaat’ (822). This stark line, even if true, seems to fall short of saying they lived happily ever after.*

**The Fathers**

The Church Fathers were writers who developed Christian theology in the first centuries of the Church. Their works (so-called patristic writings) were very influential in later medieval times. Jovinian (died c.405), argued that marriage was equal to virginity. This unorthodox view was attacked by, among others, St Jerome in Adversus Jovinianum (Against Jovinian, c.392-3). St Jerome’s text is drawn on extensively by the Wife of Bath. Chaucer also uses it elsewhere: in The Franklin’s Tale, the character Dorigen produces an enormous speech describing ideal women, taking all 22 of her examples from Jerome.

Against Jovinian depicts marriage in a strongly anti-feminist way, drawing on classical satire of women. (The women Dorigen mentions are praised because they avoid marriage at all costs.) It established a negative portrayal of women in marriage that had a wide influence in the Middle Ages. Jankin torments the Wife by reading passages from Jerome aloud.

**The Later Middle Ages**

Views of Chaucer’s time were heavily influenced by St Paul, particularly his Letter to the Ephesians: the husband is sovereign. Typical is the pronouncement of Bartolomeus Anglicanus, in De Proprietatibus Rerum (Bartholemew the Englishman, On the Properties of Things), here in the 14th century translation by John of Trevisa:

A man is the hede of a woman, as the apostle sayth. And therefore a man is bounde to rule his wife, as the heed hath cure and rule of the body.

Chaucer himself provides a lengthy exposition of marriage in The Canterbury Tales. This occurs in The Parson’s Tale, which is in fact not a tale at all but a long sermon on the Seven Deadly Sins.

The Parson considers marriage at length in the section entitled Remedium contra peccatum luxurie (Remedy against the sin of lechery). This should be read in its entirety, but here are some parts.

The Parson affirms marriage as a holy sacrament, and acknowledges the teaching of St Paul in his explanation of why one man should only have one woman and vice versa:

First, for marriage is figured bitwixe Crist and holy chirche. And that oother is for a man is heved of a woman; algate, by ordinaunce it sholde be so.

However, in explaining the husband’s role, The Parson stresses the reading of Genesis which makes woman the equal of man. This stresses the virtues of love, patience (suffraunce), truth and faith:

Now comth how that a man sholde bere hym with his wif, and namely in two thynges, that is to seyn, in suffraunce and reverence, as shewed Crist whan he made first womman. For he ne made hire nat of the heved of Adam, for she sholde nat clayme to [too] greet lordshipe. For ther as the woman hath the maistrie, she maketh to much desray [disarray, i.e. confusion]. Ther neden none ensamples of this; the experience of day by day oghte suffise. Also, certes, God ne made nat woman of the foot of Adam, for she ne sholde nat been holden to lowe; for she kan nat paciently suffer. But God made womman of the ryb of Adam, for womman sholde be felawe [companion] unto man. Man sholde bere hym to his wyf in feith, in trouthe, and in love, as seith Seint Paul, that a man sholde loven his wyf as Crist loved hooly chirche, that loved it so wel that he deyde for it. So sholde a man for his wyf, if it were need.

The passage in bold makes clear how the wife’s behaviour runs counter to official teaching. Notice how, like the Wife, the Parson says that ‘Experience’ will give us plenty of examples of ‘wo that is in mariage’.

The Parson goes on the describe the duties of a wife: her husband is her lord, but ‘he sholde be so by resoun’. She should be modest, discreet, and love her husband faithfully. Husband and wife should both be ‘trewe of hir [their] body’. The purposes of marriage are to have children, for the partners to surrender their bodies to each other, and ‘to eschewe lecherye and vileynye’. The last of these is a venial [pardonable] sin.

**Marriage in The Canterbury Tales**

Early in the twentieth century, the scholar G L Kittredge (*Chaucer and His Poetry*, 1915) argued that several of the early tales make up a ‘marriage group’, a discussion about the subject which moves through various tales and is resolved in The Franklin’s Tale.  Later readers have doubted whether we can be so certain that Chaucer planned such a group, but there is no doubt that several of the tales close together deal with marriage. It is always a battle for dominance – in Chaucer’s terms maistrie and soveraynetee. In The Merchant’s Tale an old man marries a young wife and is cuckolded; The Clerk tells a story in which a husband subjects his wife to terrible cruelties which she suffers patiently; The Wife of Bath describes her dominance in marriage over five husbands, the last involving a terrible battle against a misogynist. For her, soveraynetee is what women most desire.

Marriage in these tales is thus always about the assertion of power. One problem with this is that a power relationship seems to be incompatible with love. As Chaucer writes in The Franklin’s Tale:

Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye. Whan maistrye comth, the God of Love anon Beteth his wynges, and farewell, he is gon!

The Franklin’s Tale, with its depiction of a marriage between equals, could certainly be read as Chaucer’s resolution of this problem. While we cannot be sure that he meant the tales to be read against each other in this way, the unified nature of The Canterbury Tales certainly allows for such readings. It is well worth reading the tales of the Merchant, Clerk and Franklin as an immediate context for the Wife.

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**Sources**

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