Summary & Analysis of The Wife of Bath’s Tale

Summary

Before the Wife begins her tale, she shares information about her life and her experiences in a prologue. The Wife of Bath begins her lengthy prologue by announcing that she has always followed the rule of experience rather than authority. Having already had five husbands “at the church door,” she has experience enough to make her an expert. She sees nothing wrong with having had five husbands and cannot understand Jesus’ rebuke to the woman at the well who also had five husbands. Instead, she prefers the biblical command to go forth and multiply.

To defend her position, the Wife refers to King Solomon, who had many wives, and to St. Paul’s admonishment that it is better to marry than to burn. Having shown a knowledge of the Bible, she challenges anyone to show her that God commanded virginity. Furthermore, sexual organs are made both for functional purposes and for pleasure. And unlike many cold women, she has always been willing to have sex whenever her man wants to.

The Wife of Bath then relates tales about her former husbands and reveals how she was able to gain the upper hand (“sovereignty”) over them. Unfortunately, just at the time she gains complete mastery over one of her husbands, he dies. Then she explains how she gained control over her fifth husband.

At her fourth husband’s funeral, she could hardly keep her eyes off a young clerk named Jankyn, whom she had already admired. At the month’s end, she and Jankyn were married, even though she was twice his age. As soon as the honeymoon was over, she was disturbed to find that Jankyn spent all his time reading, especially from a collection of books that disparaged women. One night, he began to read aloud from this collection, beginning with the story of Eve, and he read about all the unfaithful women, murderers, prostitutes, and so on, that he could find. Unable to tolerate these stories any longer, the Wife of Bath grabbed the book and hit Jankyn so hard that he fell over backwards into the fire. He jumped up and hit her with his fist. She fell to the floor and pretended to be dead. When he bent over her, she hit him once more and again pretended to die. He was so upset that he promised her anything if she would live. And this is how she gained “sovereignty” over her fifth husband. From that day until the day he died, she was a true and faithful wife for him. Her tale, which follows, reiterates her belief that a happy match is one in which the wife has control.

A lusty young knight in King Arthur’s court rapes a beautiful young maiden. The people are repulsed by the knight’s behavior and demand justice. Although the law demands that the knight be beheaded, the queen and ladies of the court beg to be allowed to determine the knight’s fate. The queen then gives the knight a year to discover what women most desire.

The year passes quickly. As the knight rides dejectedly back to the court knowing that he will lose his life, he suddenly sees 24 young maidens dancing and singing. As he approaches them, the maidens disappear, and the only living creature is a foul old woman, who approaches him and asks what he seeks. The knight explains his quest, and the old woman promises him the right answer if he will do what she demands for saving his life. The queen bids the knight to speak, he responds correctly that women most desire sovereignty over their husbands.

Having supplied him with the right answer, the old crone demands that she be his wife and his love. The knight, in agony, agrees. On their wedding night, the knight pays no attention to the foul woman next to him. When she questions him, he confesses that her age, ugliness, and low breeding are repulsive to him. The old hag reminds him that true gentility is not a matter of appearances but of virtue. She tells him that her looks can be viewed as an asset. If she were beautiful, many men would be after her; in her present state, however, he can be assured that he has a virtuous wife. She offers him a choice: an old ugly hag such as she, but still a loyal, true, and virtuous wife, or a beautiful woman with whom he must take his chances. The knight says the choice is hers. And because she has “won the mastery,” she tells him, “Kiss me . . . and you shall find me both . . . fair and faithful as a wife.” Indeed, she had become a lovely young woman, and they lived happily ever after.

Analysis

The Wife’s prologue is unique in that it is longer than the tale itself. The Wife of Bath uses the prologue to explain the basis of her theories about experience versus authority and to introduce the point that she illustrates in her tale: The
thing women most desire is complete control ("sovereignty") over their husbands. Because she has had five husbands, the Wife feels that she can speak with authority from this experience, and, in the prologue, she tells how she got the upper hand with each of them.

In Chaucer's time, the antifeminism of the church was a strong controlling factor. Women were frequently characterized as almost monsters; they were sexually insatiable, lecherous, and shrewish, and they were patronized by the church authorities. Women were not allowed to participate in church doctrine in any way. Likewise, in Chaucer's time, a second marriage was considered suspect, so the Wife of Bath carefully reviews the words of God as revealed in scripture. And her knowledge of scripture (although confused at times) reveals that she is not simply an empty-minded woman. Nowhere, she confesses, can she find a stricture against more than one marriage, save the rebuke Jesus gave to the woman at the well about her five husbands. But this, she confesses, she cannot understand. Furthermore, in Chaucer's time, perpetual virginity received considerable praise; some of the saints were canonized because they preferred death to the loss of their virginity, or some struggled so fiercely to retain their virginity that they were considered martyrs and were canonized.

After the Wife of Bath departs from the holy scriptures, she appeals to common sense — if everyone remained a virgin, she offers, who would be left to give birth to more virgins? Even more basic, she maintains that the sex organs are to be used for pleasure as well as for procreation: She admits that she is a boisterous woman who enjoys sex and is not ashamed of it — a violation of the medieval view that saw sex as justified only for procreation. She also denies the popular belief that women should be submissive, especially in matters of sex.

The reader should remember that the Wife's arguments, in all cases, go against the authorities of the church and that she is a woman who prefers her own experiences to scholarly arguments. The truly remarkable aspect of the Wife of Bath's prologue is not her argument with the mores of her time or with the strictures of the church, but the very wonderful portrait of a human being. She is a woman of great vitality, a woman who is wonderfully alive and responsive. And after five husbands and hardships — she has lost her beauty and her youth — she has survived. She has the power to enjoy life with a zest denied the other dour pilgrims, and she has the will to enjoy what she cannot change.

The Wife of Bath's Tale is referred to technically as an exemplum, a story told to illustrate an intellectual idea. In this case, the tale is to provide an answer to the question "What do women most desire?" Even though Chaucer had some of the ideas from other sources (the Roman de las Rose as elaborated by Jean de Meun, and St. Jerome's comments on celibacy in Hieronymus contra Jovinianum), he reshaped the tale to fit in with the Wife of Bath's introduction and her basic thesis that women most desire "sovereignty." For example, Chaucer uses an older shrew — the Wife of Bath who has just married a man twenty years younger than she is — as the narrator telling a story about an old hag who gains sovereignty over her youthful husband and the result being that the couple live a contented and a long, happy life.

Throughout the Wife's tale, traditional values and headships, that is leadership and supremacy, are reversed or overthrown. At the beginning of the tale, King Arthur submits to the rule of Guinevere (thus abandoning both his headship of the state and his headship of the family); the ladies of the court, instead of the men, serve as justices; and the authority of books and scriptures gives way to experience. Furthermore, the knight, a rapist who has violated the sanctity of a young girl's chastity, is redeemed by another woman, albeit a hag. Finally, in the choice the hag offers the knight, both choices are intolerable. Thus, when he lets her make the decision, he has abandoned the male's sovereignty in favor of the woman's rule, thus turning the medieval world-picture "up-so-doun."

Character Description

Chaucer discusses his words to describe the Wife quite distinctly. His descriptions of her facial and bodily features are sexually suggestive. The features that Chaucer pays attention to describing Alison should be noticed. In the "General Prologue," Chaucer's description involves her physical appearance describing her clothes, legs, feet, hips, and most importantly her gap-tooth, which during that time (according to The Wife), symbolized sensuality and lust. He discusses how she is a talented weaver and devoted Christian who goes on pilgrimages often. This may make the reader believe that she is a religious woman, but the reader later sees that the Wife's reason to go on these pilgrimages is not due to religion. She feels that every place should be seen; this has nothing to due with religion. She may also be dedicated traveller, a medieval tourist who likes to sight see. She is a very self-confident woman who thinks highly of
herself and her skills as a cloth maker. The ironic part is when Chaucer adds that she has a gap between her teeth. During the fourteenth century, having a gap between the teeth was symbolic of a sensual nature. She is more interested in love than anything that has do with homemaking. He also emphasizes that she had “Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five” (Norton 92), which meant that she has been married five times. She is also described as knowing all the “remedies of love” (Norton 92), since she is so experienced with men. One other important element in the portrayal of the Wife is that she is deaf in one ear.