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CHAUCER'S AUDIENCE AND THE HENPECKED HUSBAND

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Alison of Bath as a battered wife may seem all wrong, but her fifth husband, Jankyn, did torment her and knock her down, if not out, deafening her somewhat in the process. Nevertheless, the Wife of Bath got the upper hand in this marriage as she had done in the other four and as she would probably do in the sixth, which she declared herself ready to welcome. Alison certainly ranks high among women able to gain control over their mates.

The Wife of Bath's personality, philosophy of sexuality, and attitude toward sovereignty in marriage obviously are offered as comedy. When Chaucer's short poem addressed to Bukton, who is about to marry, recommends that he read the Wife of Bath regarding "The sorwe and wo that is in mariage" (ed. Benson, p. 655), he has to mean the domination, real or attempted, or the nagging, of the husband by the wife, that is sure to follow his wedding. Why else recommend the Wife of Bath for the edification of a bridegroom-to-be? And how could such an admonition be meant as anything but jest?

The Bukton piece leaves Chaucer's present-day audience wondering whether he and Philippa, married in 1366, had lived happily ever after. Unfortunately, the *Chaucer Life-Records* tell us nothing personal such as this. As for Chaucer himself, although he uses the autobiographical first

person pronoun, his allusions to domineering and/or nagging wives are presented through the voices of his persona and of the pilgrim narrators of the *Canterbury Tales*, of whom the persona is one, all as likely to be fiction as to be fact. Chaucer remains inscrutable regarding his own marriage.

What, then, are we to make of the Bukton piece; of Alison of Bath and her anti-Pauline views on marital obligations; of the Clerk's supposedly quoted retraction (by Chaucer) of his patient Griselda as dead, buried, and not to be looked for in other wives? To the Clerk's tale, Harry Bailly exclaims, "By Goddes bones,/ Me were levere than a barel ale/ My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!" (IV.1212 b-d). There is also the Merchant's diatribe in his prologue, which follows all this, that he knows well about the woes of marriage after two months of it. This begins:

"Wepynge and waylynge, care and oother sorwe
I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe,"
Quod the Marchant, "and so doon other mo
That wedded been. I trowe that it be so,
For wel I woot it fareth so with me.
I have a wyf, the worste that may be;
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,
She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere." (IV.1213-20)

Nor is Chaucer's persona silent on the subject in this vein, for, in an aside concerning the voice of his vehicular eagle in the *House of Fame*, he quotes, with an innuendo most scholars since Skeat have taken as domestic, "'Awak.' to me he sayde,/ Ryght in the same vois and stevene/
That useth oon I koude nevene" (II.560-62).

If this is supposed to be a jest at the voice of his nagging wife, why do we find at the end of the Clerk's tale the piece identified as "Lenvoy de Chaucer," encouraging "archwives" to be strong as camels, slender ones to be like tigers. in not allowing men to do them offense? These women are advised:

Ne dred hem nat; doth hem no reverence,
For thogh thyn housbonde armed be in maille,
The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence
Shal perce his brest and eek his aventaille.
In jalousie I rede eek thou hym bynde,
And thou shalt make hym couche as doth a quaille. (IV.1201-06)

The expression "crabbed eloquence" is no compliment. The envoy is merely advising the shrews to fight back, not just against their persecutors, as did

the Wife of Bath, but against clerks who write bad stories about women, such as that of patient Griselda.

Since Chaucer is in fact the author of his own works, with or without a persona to take the blame for all the stories and quips about shrewish and/or nagging wives, there must be a reason for these, and a reason, also, for the envoy urging the shrews to fight back. The reason need not have anything to do with the character of Chaucer's own marriage. It need not mean that he personally regarded marriage as woe, or women as shrews.

Part of his reason is his knowledge of *fabliau* tradition, in which the shrewish wife is very much a stock character, as she is also in the guild plays, themselves indebted to the *fabliaux*, as Rosemary Woolf has described, especially for the portrayal of Noah's wife as a garrulous harridan (132-44). The Miller's tale refers to Absolon as participating in plays (I.3383-84), suggesting that Chaucer spoke from first-hand experience, presumably as a spectator.

More practically, and not unrelated to both literatures, Chaucer had audience awareness. As a reporter of the human condition, he identified with elements in his audience, among them married men. Speaking as one of them, he could expect those individuals, as well as Bukton, about to enter the same estate, to share the great joke of matrimony, gender-based and of course misogynistic, that with marriage comes a wife, who will rule the household of which the husband is supposedly the head. One way of telling that jest is to start a discussion that takes the form of complaints. This happens in the *Canterbury Tales* when the Clerk ends his tale by disclaiming his heroine, and by quoting the wry "Envoy de Chaucer," Harry Bailly adding his wish that his wife had heard the Clerk's tale and the Merchant sounding his complaint that, after two months of marriage, he finds that he has the worst wife in the world. One would expect the married men hearing this to chuckle. But, needless to say, Chaucer's audience included women as well. In that day, when all marriage was Pauline at least in theory, and permanent sacramentally as well as legally, both "archwives" and "sklendre" had promised to obey. Women could join the laughter at this old chestnut because the shrew was some other woman. Of course good Christian wives never nagged their husbands.

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