

THE PROLOGUE^o
TO THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

"Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage.^o
For, lordinges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
5 Thonked be God that is eterne on live,
Housbondes at chirche dore I have had five —
If I so ofte myghte have wedded be^o —
And all were worthy men in hir degree.
"But me was toold certeyn, not longe agoon is,
10 That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but ones
To wedding in the Cane of Galilee,
That by the same ensample taughte he me
That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.^o

sufficient for me

gentlemen / since
lives eternally

in their rank
not long ago
only went once

his example
only once

Prologue: The Wife of Bath's Prologue, as well as her tale, following, are taken from the third fragment (Fragment III or Group D) of the *Canterbury Tales*.

1-3. Experience, though . . . mariage: Even if there were no authorities on the woes of marriage, I could speak from experience on the subject. The Wife of Bath speaks as if in response to someone who had spoken about the woes of marriage, but Fragment III is not clearly connected with any preceding tale. Some scholars believe that Chaucer may have constructed this passage intending to link her prologue with the epilogue to Man of Law's Tale at the end of Fragment II or Group B¹. The blank space is variously filled by "Squire," "Summoner," or "Shipman" in the manuscripts that contain this passage:

"Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat,"
Seyde the _____. "Heer schall he nat preche.
He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
We leven alle in the grete God," quod he;
"He wolde sewen some difficulte,
Or springen cokkel in our clene corn.
And therefore, Hoost, I warne thee biforn,
My joly body schal a tale telle,
And I schal clynken you so mery a belle,
That I schal waken al this compaignie.
But it schal nat ben of philosophie,
Ne phisylas, ne termes queinte of lawe.
Ther is but litel Latyn in my mawe."

7. If I . . . be: If it is possible to be wedded so often.

10-13. That sith . . . ones: Because Christ only attended one wedding in his life (the one at Cana at Galilee, John 2:1), he taught that people should marry only once. This interpretation is taken from Jerome's letter *Adversus Jovinianum* I, 40. Saint Jerome (c. 340-420) is best known for his version of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. Little is known of Jovinian except for what Jerome refers to in his letter refuting his heretical and "stupid" ideas. The Wife of Bath, however, argues in favor of many of the ideas of the more liberal Jovinian, particularly those having to do with virginity and marriage. Chaucer certainly was familiar with Jerome's long epistle against Jovinian, which provides much of the antifeminist material found in the Wife of Bath's Prologue.

Herkne eek, which a sharp word for the nones
15 Beside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,
Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan,^o
'Thou hast yhad five housbondes,' quod he,
'And that ilke man that now hath thee
Is not thine housbonde.'^o Thus he seyde certeyn.
20 What that he mente therby, I kan not sayn.
"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 mine age
25 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.
Men may devine and glosen up and doun,
But well I woot, expres, withoute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye.^o
That gentil text kan I well understonde!

same
for sure

say
But now I ask you
not a

As yet I have not heard
this number defined
speculate and interpret
I know without doubt

30 Eck well I woot he seyde mine housbonde
Sholde lete fader and mooder and take to me.^o
But of no nombre mencion made he,
Of bigamye or of octogamye.

And well I know
Should leave / cleave
made no mention
marrying twice or eight times

Why sholde men speke of it vileynye?

35 "Lo, here the wise king, daun Salomon,
I trowe he hadde wives many oon!^o
As wolde God it were levelful unto me
To be refreshed half so oft as he.
Which yifte of God hadde he for alle his wives!

hear (of) / master Solomon
I believe
Would that God allowed me

40 No man hath swich that in this world alive is.
God woot, this noble king, as to my wit,
The firste night had many a myrie fit
With ech of hem, so well was him on live.
Blessed be God that I have wedded five.

in my opinion
The wedding night
so lusty was he
Thank God

44a [Of whiche I have picked out the beste
Bothe of hir nether purs^o and of hir cheste.

All of my references to Jerome are to Book I of his two-volume *Adversus Jovinianum*.

14-16. Herkne eek . . . Samaritan: Listen, also, to the sharp words Jesus spoke in reproof of the Samaritan. Notice that the Wife of Bath goes on to take on even Jesus.

17-19. Thou hast . . . housbonde: See John 4:17-18.

28. God bad . . . multiplye: God told us to procreate. See Genesis 1:28.

31. Sholde lete . . . me: See Matthew 19:5.

36. many oon: Many a one. In 1 Kings 11:3 Solomon is said to have had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines.

44b. nether purs: Presumably a reference to her husbands' genitalia. The "cheste" refers to their financial wealth.