



Voices in The Wife of Bath's Tale

If you're looking for a nice, neat relationship between teller and tale, you'll miss out on the fascinating contradictions and ironies produced by Chaucer's complex mix of voices, which both undermine the genre of the tale and raise questions about the underlying ideas it claims to promote. So argues Dr Katherine Limmer.

The strength of the Wife of Bath's voice in her prologue is such that readers expect to hear it equally strongly in her tale. Readings which remain focused on identifying this voice as the dominant narrator of her tale, however, can over-emphasise those sections which support pre-existing ideas about the Wife's views and character and, conversely, overlook those which consist of different voices and concerns. These other voices are particularly evident in the second half of the tale where the hag's defence of poverty and low birth, for example, is hard to reconcile with the status-conscious and richly dressed character of the Wife established in her prologue.

Rather than looking for a novelistic concept of character in our reading of her tale, therefore, it is more helpful to think of the Wife as a dramatic voice. Even with this distinction in mind, we must remain alert to the other voices in the tale; paying attention to these other voices reveals aspects of the tale's themes and style that an exclusive focus on the Wife's voice may obscure. These aren't only the voices of the tale's characters but also of different medieval genres that Chaucer and his audience were familiar with, such as the moral disquisition and the Arthurian romance.

The Arthurian Romance

The tale the Wife tells is an example of a popular medieval genre: the Arthurian romance. Such stories told of the adventures of a knight on a quest undertaken in order to win or defend a lady. This was quite an old-fashioned genre by the time Chaucer was writing, however, and there is evidence to suggest that it was not a form that he himself respected, which may explain why he chooses to tell it in such an ambiguous fashion. The tale's narrative begins conventionally enough by establishing its setting in the legendary past of King Arthur. This setting is a marked contrast to the world of the Wife's prologue, which is aggressively contemporary and materialistic, and Chaucer produces humour from the clash of the voices of these two different worlds. The voice of the romance genre narrator is more

reserved, objective and serious than that of the Wife and, after only five lines of romance style scene-setting, this other voice, cynical and personal, breaks through. The Wife's voice is particularly strong in the two digressions from the romance narrative, which occur in quick succession after the tale's opening, and return to topics familiar from her prologue.

The Role of the Digressions

In the first of these digressions (862-81) the ironic and personal tone is immediately recognisable, and its criticisms of the greed and licentiousness of friars continues the war of words begun between the Wife and the Friar in the prologue. In a satirical turn of humour, typical of the Wife's voice, we are told that all the fairies have been driven out of England by a plague of friars. After this digression the voice of the romance tale resumes and its plot develops with a knight finding himself subject to a seemingly impossible quest with a time limit and the threat of death if he fails. The knight is set the task of discovering, 'what thing is it that woomen moost desiren.' The actions of the knight are described in a sincere voice, which emphasises the ethical dimension of his quest:

*[he] taketh his leve, and wendeth forth his weye
He seketh every hous and every place
Whereas he hopeth for to findeth grace
To lerne what thing women loveth most
918-21*

But this 'voice of romance' is once again interrupted by the more satirical tone we associate with the Wife, and the tale digresses into a comic catalogue of the faults and weaknesses of women (923-83). As in her prologue, the Wife's voice is used to propagate misogynistic stereotypes of women for comic effect. This particularly jars against the genre of her tale, however, as the romance genre was associated with noble female patrons and was often more sympathetic to female characters and their concerns than other medieval genres.

When investigating the dramatic voices in the tale, it is telling that, in this digression, pronouns identifying the speaker specifically as a woman are repeatedly used. When we are told,

*Some seyde that our hertes been moost esed
Whan that we be yflatered and yplesed*

we are clearly invited to hear this as being spoken by the Wife. As in her prologue, the voice is direct and personally addresses the listener when she asks, 'wol ye heere the tale?' before further digressing into the legend of Midas. Thus we can identify two competing voices battling for control not just of the narrative but also of its tone and setting: the Wife's voice

which is personal, direct and cynical; and the voice of the romance genre which is sincere, objective and distant.

Speech – the Voices of the Characters

From this point in the tale, however, the voice of the Wife progressively fades out and is replaced by what Helen Cooper has identified as one of the 'striking features of the tale': an unusually high proportion of speech. Cooper calculates that from the knight's first meeting with the hag, until her transformation (997-1249), there are only 27 lines that are not speech of some kind. The distancing effect of the Wife's voice is replaced by the more involving voices of the characters of the tale themselves, principally those of the hag and the knight. In contrast to the Wife, these characters' voices are characterised by their formality and sincerity. The knight, for example, addresses the hag and Queen Guinevere with studied politeness, as 'my leeve mooder' and 'my lige lady' respectively. Narrative duties are shared between these two voices and a more reserved, objective narrative voice that can speak of typical romance genre occurrences, such as the magical disappearance of four and twenty dancing ladies, without irony.

This change to a more objective voice is particularly evident in the personal pronouns used in the hag's disquisition on 'gentillesse' (1109-1176). Despite being female, her voice is not as insistently gendered as the voice of the Wife, and when she uses first-person pronouns,

*Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse
Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse
1117-8*

unlike the Wife, she's referring to all people, not just women. Some critics suggest that not only has the Wife's voice been displaced in the disquisition on 'gentillesse', but also that the voice it is replaced by is one very close to Chaucer's own. This idea is suggested by the way it appeals to writers and ideas which reflect what are known to be Chaucer's own tastes and concerns. For example, the hag names Dante and Boethius in support of her points, both authors Chaucer admired and imitated. The argument that the hag is making about the nature of true 'gentillesse' is also one that Chaucer returned to repeatedly, not only in *The Canterbury Tales* but in other works.

The Wife's voice is still occasionally identifiable, however, despite being much less dominant. For example, when the knight addresses the ladies of the court we are told that present were, 'many a wydwe, for that they been wise' (1026-7). Given the Wife's own status, and view of widowhood, it is hard not to hear this narratorial comment as her own. The Wife's habit of passing first-person comment on the tale she's telling is also occasionally evident, as when she suggests her hearers may criticise her for not describing the joy of the wedding of the knight and the hag,

*to which thyng shortly answeren I shal:
I seye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al:*

The ironic effect of this comment is also far more in keeping with the Wife's approach than that of romance tales as a genre.

The Return of the Wife's Voice

The Wife's voice returns with a vengeance at the tale's conclusion, where the fairy-tale resolution of the romance narrative is comically undermined by being followed by the Wife's highly personal gloss on its moral. The conventional ending to the tale of the knight and the hag sees the knight rewarded for his new-learned humility towards women with a bride who will be both beautiful and faithful. The question of mastery in marriage is also resolved when the narrative voice reveals she,

*obeyed hym in every thyng
That might doon hym plesance.*

The return of the Wife's voice, signalled by its use of 'us' to refer specifically to women, is evident in the partisan wishes, inspired by the tale's happy ending, for all women to be blessed with a young lusty husband. Perhaps more seriously she overturns her tale's carefully balanced distribution of mastery in marriage by cursing husbands who won't be ruled by their wives. The hyperbole of this curse and the ironic use of religious terms for irreligious wishes, reminds us of the way Chaucer undermines the Wife's voice and ideas. Conversely, it also re-establishes the strength and power of that voice as she determinedly gets the last word.

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