

Toole, JK
Oct. 17, 1955
English 201L
Mr. Foote

I

If we consider the Canterbury Tales as being of a theatrical nature, which seems quite likely, then those characters crossing the "moving stage" are actually "performing,"

The most delightful member of the *dramatis personae* is the Wife of Bath who winningly and unwittingly reveals herself to the reader. Naturally, her cause is the sovereignty of women, and she presents her case in a ludicrous and quite irrational manner.

Her long prologue is dominated by amusing personal interpretations of the Bible, and seems to set the mood for the rest of her performance. Her treatment of her husbands is a mixture of the ridiculous and the cruel. If, given control, women were to manage their husbands in so unfair a manner, it seems likely that female mastery would never come about.

Although she little realizes it, the wife of Bath seems to be harming her cause more than helping it, and, although she appears a frivolous and disarming person, her private conduct could hardly be called anything more than malicious.

It is interesting to note that her story depends strongly upon the supernatural element to make it plausible. That no hag, given the reins in marriage, can automatically become ravishing seems never to have occurred to the Wife of Bath.

At best, her argument is one to be considered lightly, to amuse rather than to affect. But in the Wife of Bath, Chaucer has given us the best character study in the collection, and we may feel grateful for this.

The Merchant, on the other hand, is extremely level-headed, even to the point of being pompous in his mundane stuffiness. His prologue is brief and despairing. He is quick to reveal that his new wife is the cause of his sorrow and generally pessimistic attitude.

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Naturally, the tale that follows is a sensible one, and his use of the supernatural seems justifiable. Even though it was physically wrong for December to marry May, she had accepted the bonds of marriage and was obliged to fulfill her duty of loyalty. It seems right that December's eyesight was regained at the iniquitous moment, and, even if it hadn't been, May's actions were certainly not acceptable. As it is, the return of December's eyesight only offers May another opportunity to deceive her gullible mate.

The Merchant's tale is considerably more forceful than either the prologue or the tale of the Wife of Bath. It was probably his intense unhappiness in his own marriage which led him to make his tale so convincing. It is enough to cause in any man some degree of distrust of the weaker sex.

In the person of the Franklin we have a character about whom we know very little, so far as his position as the battlefield of the sexes is concerned.

But his tale compensates for this. In it we see that a woman, however loyal and well-meaning, makes a weak leader in marriage. Whereas May had very little loyal sentiment swelling in her breast, Dorigen was an example of the perfect wife. And even this creature made a great mistake from which only human sympathy saved her.

The Franklin leaves to our imaginations the decision of what would happen in other such cases in which there was no kindly Aurelius. It is the element of the moving rocks which detracts from the story's significance.

In conclusion, the Merchant's tale is the strongest, his performance in the war the most acceptable and commanding.

The Franklin was a weak second best, his tale leaving the reader unsatisfied.

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As for the Wife of Bath--well, we can only call her a treacherous buffoon, a soldier with enthusiasm, but not having a complete mental picture of her cause, she is a likable, misdirected warrior.

II

Chaucer's three-fold dramatic principle is a very important concept in the understanding of the author's work.

First, we may list antagonism, because it is generally the motivating force for his tales. Miller vs Reeve is an outstanding example of this and makes a combination that, I would imagine includes two of the readers' favorite tales. This antagonism makes important links between tales that give the entire collection remarkable continuity.

Suitability of tale to teller is another part of the principle, one which Chaucer has adhered to religiously. Who but the Knight could have told so gallant a story as the Knight's Tale, making the blind actions of Arcite and Pulaman so acceptable in spite of their nonsensical bases.

Self-revelation figures perhaps most prominently in the ramblings of the Wife of Bath. Rarely, even in contemporary literature, do characters strip themselves so naked, figuratively speaking, as did the Wife of Bath. We see the inner machinations of her simple-evil brain working clearly, pierce easily through her amiable exterior.

It can only be said that the use of the three-fold dramatic principle by so early a writer is remarkable. That it was so successful only indicates that Chaucer was a very early, very good psychologist.