

## **Does the Wife make a good case for more than one marriage in the first 162 lines of the Wife of Bath's Prologue?**

The Wife of Bath clearly believes strongly in a woman's right to marry freely. However, whether she puts her argument across effectively is a different matter. Her position to marriage is in direct conflict with that of the Church at that time which believed that marriage was a sacred union and one could marry only once. On the one hand, her argument is strong. She uses Biblical references to support her argument, a risky tactic used by Chaucer given the moral strength of the Church at the time- although the Church's power was being challenged more and more in this period of change. She is very defensive in her arguments, because she has had more than one marriage herself and therefore she needs to argue her case fully. She extensively uses metaphors to argue her case too, an effective method of debating. It could also be said that she strengthens her argument by repeating what she has already previously stated. However, there are flaws in her argument. By repeating what she has said, it could be said that her argument merely lacks structure. Also she seems to contradict various points in her line of reasoning, a significant flaw in the way she makes her case.

Her argument advocating polygamy is, in effect, an attack on the Church's principles at this time. Whereas the religious authority believed that people should adhere to the principles of virginity, she argues that if everyone were chaste, there would be no next generation:

“if ther were no seed ysowe,  
Virginitee, thane wherof sholde it growe?”

This is a good logical statement to make in her argument and it throws the gauntlet on the Church, making their religious ideology seem flawed. There is example here, too, of the metaphors Chaucer uses in her argument to make the language seem more attractive, the “seed” that one would “ysowe” representing the act of procreation.

In the first part of the Prologue, she makes several references to Biblical characters, which questions the Church's stance given that these individuals all had more than one wife at some point. She even goes as far as to suggest God has double standards, by pronouncing that:

“As wolde God it were leveful unto me  
To be refreshed half so ofte as he!”

By saying this, which roughly means that she wishes God would allow her as many partners as King Salomon. This implies that God, or possibly the Church, was practising duplicity by describing a bigamist in the bible as “wise” whilst condemning those who had more than one marriage in reality as being sinners.

By using metaphors, Chaucer explores different ideas and can portray the Dame as being bawdy without using crude language. This is a key device, as it allowed the poet to avoid

censorship yet retaining a certain degree of humour in the verse. This can be seen where she is talking about the husband being obliged to satisfy his wife's sexual appetite:

“Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement,  
If he ne used his sely instrument?”

This is questioning how a man could give his woman sexual satisfaction if he cannot have sex with her. She uses an extended metaphor for the sexual obligation the man in a relationship has, using the image of a “dette” (debt) which is why she uses the noun “paiement” (payment) instead of a more explicit word. This use of innuendo allows Chaucer more freedom to be creative in his language, and not fall into biological terms, which a subject like this might threaten. Further example of this allusion to sexual activity can be found in the extract, with “sely instrument” a connotation for the husband's male member. These metaphors help to give the poem more of a sophisticated air in contrast to the bawdy humour the Wife, Alison, prefers. Most importantly, though, they augment the effectiveness of the argument by grabbing the listeners' attention.

A clear strategy used by Alison to strengthen her case is the application of repetition. She reiterates several ideas, in particular the use of religious examples to prove that her cause is right. Not only does she use the Biblical characters Solomon, Lameth, Abraham and Jacob to prove that more than one marriage is reasonable, but she also manipulates the words of the Apostle Paul, ironically her greatest critic, to substantiate her argument:

“Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me;  
And bad oure housebondes for to love us weel.”

This relates to Paul teaching men to love their wives, but the Wife uses this to her advantage in both an endorsement of marriage and a gift of power to the woman, as the disciple is effectively causing men to owe a debt of love to their wives. This repetition of religious examples reinforces her argument among the other pilgrims. This could be compared with a modern political slogan, Tony Blair's “Education, education, education” which was used to reinforce his party's focus on education in the 1997 General Election. This shows that repetition, which is used to some extent in the Dame's argument, is an effective means of making a good case.

However, this is not to say that all of her argument is presented well by the Wife. The repetition which could be seen by some to be an effective line of reasoning, could- like the religious examples- be used on the other side of the argument to suggest the Wife of Bath's argument is flawed. The way she repeats her argument could, in fact, lead some to assume her case is flawed and that in reality her argument lacks structure. For instance, the way she seems to meander through her argument in