The Structure of Reversal in the *Wife of Bath*’s Prologue

HASEGAWA Kazuko

In the *Wife of Bath*’s Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*, the portrait of the wife’s, Alisoun’s personality and the description of her performance are so rich and peculiar among other pilgrims that many scholars have approached her from various phases. Sometimes she seems an early feminist proponent of women’s right, and at other times she seems the archetype of a wicked woman like Eve who caused Adam’s fall from grace and at the same time she is a financially autonomous woman with higher skill of weaving than that of weavers in Ypres and Graunt. In both her speech and performance, she shows us her vigorous vitality that tends to be wanton and irreverent. And she gives validity to the wantonness and irreverence by the perversion of patristic precepts of the Bible, upon which the medieval audience may have frowned. Such a woman who goes beyond the moral, economic, and sexual frame of common medieval women talks about woe in marriage through the experience of her five time marriages. And the content of her prologue links with her *Tale* with the theme of the women’s chief desire.

The aim of this study is to explicate her woe covered with her audacity seen in her personality, belief, and performance, in view of the structure of reversal.

At the beginning of her prologue, she introduces her own understanding of marriage and virginity, based on the perverted authority of the Bible. In speaking of her five time marriages, she asserts them and marriage itself not to be sinful, reinforcing her assertion with an apostle’s saying:

For thanne th’ apostle seith that I am free
To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me.
He seith that to be wedded is no synne: (49-51)
And she quotes the commandment “to wexe and multiplye”(28) from Genesis in order to justify the use of her “instrument.” Concerning the understanding of marriage and virginity, there are antagonistic arguments both on the Christian doctrinal level and her private level. In the history of the formal interpretation of marriage, sometimes it was regarded as a sin and sometimes celebrated and then justified based on the validity of generation. And wedding was hold by church just as the wife had five husbands “at chirche dore”(GP. 460). The justification is a kind of compromise in the reverse structure of the historical interpretation. Using this unnatural compromise, the wife tries to construct her positive argument:

I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in fruyt of mariaghe.  (113-114)

But she has no “fruyt,” namely, no child. As soon as the validity of the free use of her flesh is nullified, the reverse structure is constructed. But she pretends that she has no recognition of this inconsistency.

And just before she is going to talk about her own experience, she makes a previous excuse to other pilgrims:

But yet I praye to al this compaignye,
If that I speke after my fantasye,
As taketh not agrief of that I seye,
For myn entente nys but for to pleye.  (189-192)

Despite the above excuse, she affirms the truth of her tale in the following lines:

As evere moote I drynken wyn or ale,
I shal seye sooth;....  (194-195)

The truth of her tale and the tale spoken to make sport can't be compatible. As her prologue commences in the reverse structure, there is another structure of reversal constituted of inconsistent words in this sequence of her speech.

When Chaucer lets the wife talk about her husbands in her conjugal life, he prepares the structure again. After she finishes expounding her anti-patristic
understanding of marriage and virginity, she begins to talk about her five husbands and affirms that all of them were “worthy men” (8). But gradually she begins to grumble about them:

I shal seye sooth; tho housbondes that I hadde,
As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.
The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;
Unnethe myghte they the statut holde
In which that they were bounden unto me. (195-199)

Concerning the forth and fifth husbands who are evaluated to be “badde,” the evaluation is obviously incongruous with her general affirmation of “worthy” at the beginning. The reverse structure is evidently constructed.

And the word “worthy” becomes significant in regard to the first three. Since she represents herself as “a lusty oon” (605), the situation that the three old husbands couldn’t satisfy her carnal desire doesn’t yield her evaluation of the worthy “husbands.” They were really inadequate husbands for her. Therefore Chaucer uses the word “men” carefully instead of “husbands.” In Chaucer’s works, the word “worthy” means “respectable, having worth or standing, distinguished, brave, excellent,” and “suitable.” Whatever meaning we choose among them, each one has a good and positive denotation. But the wife neither respected nor loved the three so that she says the following statement without a moment’s hesitation:

Me neded nat do lenger diligence
To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence. (205-206)

Far from that, as she calls them “Sire olde kaynard” (235), “Sire olde lecchour” (243), “verray knave” (253), “lurel” (273), “olde dotard shrew” (291), “olde bare-ful of lyes” (302), “olde dotard” (331), “sire shewe” (355), and “Sire olde fool” (337), it is apparent that she scorned them. Moreover she uses similes “as a feend” (244) and “as a mous” (246) to express them pejoratively. Judging from the above evidence, I can easily infer that the only thing worthy of her good evaluation is their land and treasure. She uses the word “worthy” in the only meaning of “wealth” and ignores its other inherent good meanings like “respectable, brave,” and “excellent,” related
to one's humanity.

When I think about the antagonistic facts that the medieval Christian doctrine denied "richness" or "wealth" because it was a symbol of the terrestrial desire which prevented a man from getting God's love, and at the same time, not only the newly enriched mercantile class but also the ecclesiastics were eager to accumulate wealth, I find that the medieval real world constructed the structure of reversal in regard to wealth.⁴

Based on the reverse structure of the real world, Chaucer's audience may have inverted the wife's evaluation through their analogy because richness was so overtly evaluated to be "worthy" by her, in addition to Chaucer's usage of the word in a narrowly limited meaning.

In the "General Prologue," Chaucer introduces the wife's economic autonomy based on her excellent skill of weaving in the first place and then her hypocritical way of offering, her fashion, and her countenance. And he concludes "She was a worthy womman al hir lyve" (459).⁵ In the above descriptions, what deserves getting the evaluation of "worthy" is her economic autonomy. Chaucer uses the word in the restricted meaning of richness because her other aspects are neither respectable nor excellent. Especially her conspicuous way of offering is a frowned behavior which violates the precept in Matthew 6, 2: "When therefore thou doest thine alms, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men."⁶ Although the economic autonomy can be evaluated to be "worthy" today, the perfect autonomy was not respectable as it was against the system of patriarchy.⁷ In accordance with this use of the word in the "General Prologue," the wife evaluates the richness of the first three husbands in her own prologue. When the word is used to express rich persons without respectability or excellence, including the wife and her first three husbands, the gap between the peculiar use and the common or normal use is wide and paradoxically it foils negative aspects. This is also the structure of reversal, which creates a kind of irony.

The reverse structure is also prepared for her wealth. Getting wealth from the three husbands, she shows strong adhesion to it as follows:

Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood,
Be maister of my body and my good;
That oon thou shalt forgo, maugree thyne yen.  

(313-315)

The wife who loved wealth so much married the fifth husband not for his richness but for her love to him, according to her confession(514). And she continues telling us that she loved him best(514). For the first time she seems to awake to love. Then she gave him all her land and property(630). The presentation suggests her mammonism retreats because of love. Here I can see the reverse structure of getting one and losing the other. When she insists on the strong possession of her property, she doesn't get the carnal gratification. And giving the property to her husband, she gets it. But Chaucer shows us the double reversal which lets us know that her adhesion to wealth is never completely abandoned. After a terrible quarrel and fight between her and the fifth husband, she gained a victory over him and took back the property from him. Chaucer lets the wife speak carefully about her victory as below:

He yat me al the bridel in myn hond,
To han the governance of hous and lond,
And of his tonge, and of his hond also;  

(813-815)

The husband gave her the sovereignty over his house, land, tongue, and hand. This is not the result of his love but a negotiation brought by his will. Therefore there is no word suggesting his heart. Judging from the reverse construction in which the shift of her property and her carnal gratification has been unfolded, I can easily analogize that she would hold her last dissatisfactory carnal situation again when she took back the property as a booty of the last fight.

Moreover, at the beginning part of the introduction of the fifth husband, she states that she likes to chase a lover who is not easily caught:

...for that he
Was of his love daungerous to me.
We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,
In this matere a queynyte fantasye,
Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,
Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.  

(513-518)
Her tendency mentioned above suggests that her chase will never end and her chief desire will not be achieved. In Chaucer's reverse structure, her victory is a sorrowful comedy. Condemning him for being a “shrewe,” she has to pursue him. Therefore, her statements that the fifth husband was the most scoundrel (505) and she loved him best (513) are not contradictory, not from the viewpoint of a taste of love as seen in “For bede us thyng, and desiren we” (159), but the viewpoint of the reverse structure.

Here I must amplify on the subject of her spiritual life as well as her carnal life. She dares to say that she set no value on their love after she had gotten the land and treasure from the first three husbands (205-206). Why did she reject their love? She scorned them as I have mentioned and she was angry at their comparison of her with oxen, asses, horses, and dogs that could be proved before their purchase (285), and at their treatment of her as a fool: “What, wenestow make an ydiot of oure dame?” (311). Obviously they didn't respect her so that she rejected their love without any respect for her as a wife. Consequently she holds woe in marriage, which can't be satisfied even by their wealth, beside the carnal dissatisfaction. But this woe is covered with the superficial anger. So she often exaggerates her own tough figure:

\[
\text{An housbonde I wol have- I wol nat lette-} \\
\text{Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,} \quad (154-155)
\]

\[
\text{And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale} \\
\text{Of tribulacion in mariage,} \\
\text{Of which I am expert in al my age-} \\
\text{This is to sayn, myself have been the whippe-} \quad (173-175)
\]

When the audience hear the above statements, they think that her husbands were in great tribulation like a “slave” under her “whip.” In fact, she tells us several episodes accentuating her strength and toughness in fisticuffs, quarrels, disputes, and sexual strategy. Here the woe mentioned at the opening of her prologue is proved to be that of husbands. On the other hand, she says as below in other lines:

\[
\text{Right thus Apostel tolde it unto me,} \\
\]

—102—
And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.
Al this sentence me liketh every deel. (160-162)

The above statement reveals that her mastery did not prevail over her husbands’ hearts. Therefore she eagerly praises up an apostle who instructed husbands to love their wives. Although her praise seems to be inconsistent with her rejection for the first three husbands’ love, her praise is the reverse expression that she was not loved with their respect and then she was in spiritual tribulation. Concerning the woe in marriage, the wife begins to speak of it as if she had experienced it and then she reveals that her husbands experienced it under torments by her. And at the end the audience notice that it is hers. This is the very structure of reversal.

As the consequence of the last fight between the wife and the fifth husband, she concludes:

And that he seyde, “Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;
Keep thyn thee honour, and keep eek myn estaat-
After that day we hadden never debaat.
God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
And also trewe, and so was he to me. (819-825)

Here, Chaucer prepares the structure of double reversal. First, she seems to transform herself from a shrewish wife to a meek wife on the superficial structure. In the above quotation, there is a deceptive and peaceful relationship between a submitted man and a woman ruling him. Though the husband gave her freedom to do anything which she liked, there is no word suggesting that he became an “adequate” husband who respected her and solved her carnal problem. Then Chaucer lets the wife say carefully that she became a “kynde” wife but never say that she did a devoted wife. Chaucer’s deliberate structure is effective. The superficial structure of the tamed wife is to be inverted again. So the audience infer that her dissatisfied, dissipated, and aberrant life will continue. Consequently the woe revealed in the lamentation over her age increases its depth and reality:
The Structure of Reversal in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*

But age, alas, that al wole envenyme,
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.  (474-475)

Once the audience touch her woe, her expectation that she will welcome the sixth husband whenever he shall come sounds in vain. For her argument of the validity of the free use of her flesh, the truth of her prologue, the use of the word “worthy,” the social reality for wealth, her possession of wealth and her chase for true love, and the woe in marriage are all set in the structure of reversal. So the structure is to be applied to the end. By piling up the obvious examples of inconsistent statements and establishing the structure of reversal, the last reversal which is never mentioned is left in readers’ analogy. Although Chaucer treats the wife’s audacity superficially, he tries to tell her woe covered with her merriment or audacity and caused by the treatment without any respect which medieval women couldn’t require formally. The impossibility of its overt declaring or requesting accords with the non-descriptive expression of analogy.

**Notes**

1) At the end of the thirteenth century, Ypres and Gaunt in Belgium were the biggest centers of the woolen cloth-making in Europe.


5) Italics are not original.


**Bibliography**


The Structure of Reversal in the Wife of Bath's Prologue


抄録

“バースの奥方”の前口上における逆転の構造

長谷川 和 子

チョーサー作『カンターベリー物語』中のバースの奥方による前口上に現れる彼女の人間像は、中世文学に描かれた女性の中で最も生き生きとして、肉体的にも精神的にも強く逞しい女性に見える。彼女は腕に栄を持って経済的に自立しており、フェミニズムの先駆者のようにもあり、イヴに代表される男を堕落させる悪い女のようにも描かれ、その言動の過激さ、下品さ、身勝手さ、元気さ、大胆さ、陽気さが目を付く。

本稿では次の事を明らかにする。チョーサーは彼女の語りの中に明らかな逆転の図式を幾つも積み上げる。例えば彼女が語りを始める前に「わたしが勝手気使にやべても、みんな冗談でいうのですから気を悪くしないで聞いて下さい」と話の信頼性を自らあやふやにしている。そして話が実際に始まった「みなさん、これから正真正銘、本当のことを話しましょう」と話の信頼性を主張する。そして五人の夫を、「この五人の夫は、それぞれ身分が違っていましたが、みな立派な男でした」と紹介するが、個々の人物の説明になると、はっきりと三人中二人は「悪いやつでした」と評価が逆転する。残りの三人の「立派さ」も、逆転的「立派さ」であることは、「おしばれさん、この古いばれ野郎め、おまさのような悪党、この悪党め」と彼女が夫を軽蔑的に呼ぶ事に明らかである。彼女の話の数々に逆転が用意されている。そして最後の逆転だけを表現せず聴衆の類推の中で、逆転を完成させる。そうする事によって、奥方の表面上の陽気さや強さの下に隠れた彼女の悲しみを描いた。その悲しみとは、夫から妻として「尊敬されて」愛されないというものである。中世の女性は公然と尊敬に基づいた愛など夫に要求できなかった。チョーサーはこの口に出せない妻の主張を言葉で表現せずに類推を誘導する形で表現した。