

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

1. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics of Human Communication (1967), by psychologists Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don D. Jackson is basically an attempt to analyze and explain pathological communication and its possible causes from the perspective of pragmatics. One of the most attractive aspects of the book is the fact that the writers turn frequently to literature in search of examples to illustrate their thesis. It was precisely from one such example that the idea for this article arose.

In the seventh chapter of the book, there is an interesting reference to the relationship between the witch and the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*,¹ as a case of what is referred to in the book as 'double bind'. Double bind situations arise, according to Watzlawick (1967: 197), when:

1. Two or more people participate in an intense relationship that is highly important for the physical or psychological survival of one, several or all of them.

2. In this context, one of them gives a message which is structured in such a way that: a) it states something, b) it states something about the statement itself c) both statements are mutually exclusive.

Thus, the message is an instruction that must be disobeyed in order to be obeyed. The hearer is prevented from escaping the framework established by that message, either by metacommunicating on it or withdrawing. Therefore,

¹ From now on, I will refer to the tale as *WBT*.

although the message makes no sense from the logical point of view, it constitutes a pragmatic reality: the hearer cannot help reacting to it, but at the same time s/he cannot react to it appropriately (not paradoxically), since the message is, in itself, paradoxical.

In this paper I intend:

a) To make an analysis of the prologue and the *WBT* from the point of view of pragmatics.

b) To find out if both the prologue and the tale pursue/achieve the same effect in the audience/reader, although through different stylistic devices.

c) To verify whether the conclusions reached in the analysis, from the perspective of pragmatics, coincide with Watzlawick's conclusions (1967) reached from a psychological approach.

2. THEORETICAL SUPPOSITIONS OF THE ANALYSIS

My analysis is based on Teun A. Van Dijk's theory of pragmatics (1977) and the postulates set forth by Geoffrey Leech (1983). In questions relating to literary politeness, I have basically followed the work of Roger Sell (1985, 1986).

Literary pragmatics considers the literary text as an interactive process between the writer and the reader, always linked to the social context in which it evolves. Sell (1985:2) writes: "(Literary Pragmatics) does not fundamentally distinguish the communication between literary writers and their readers from any other type of communication". If we accept these assumptions, the next step would be to ask ourselves what exactly is to be understood by context in a literary text, and how it differs from the context of a real conversation.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) understand context (in a conversation) to be the knowledge that the hearer has of the speaker, of the situation, of other more remote situations related to this one, and of the world in general. This context is what allows him, by deduction, to reach a series of conclusions as

to the communicative intention of the speaker, beyond the literal content. In the case of a literary text, it is more difficult to define exactly what constitutes the context, because there is not just one but rather several contexts, since the text, although originally intended for the public of a particular period, has also, as its audience, anyone who may read it in later times. Thus, we must perhaps speak of various contexts in the reception of a literary text and, logically, of different interpretations of it; from there, it also follows that the greater our knowledge is of the period in which a particular work was written, and of the circumstances surrounding its creation, the more rewarding our reading of the text will be, and the greater our enjoyment. Our context as readers, however, will always be different from that of the audience of the period in which the text was written. This is why, for us, it will also have other connotations, other nuances.

Apart from this 'external' context, in which the relationship between writer and reader would be situated, there exists another 'internal' context which includes everything that happens within the text. Génette (1980) proposed the terms *extradiegetic level* (external) and *intradiegetic level* (internal) for these two types of context.¹

In the *Canterbury Tales*, since we are dealing with a story within a story, we should perhaps speak of two different contexts at the intradiegetic level. According to this, we would place the relationship between the characters of the works in a first intradiegetic level, whereas the action within the work would be situated in a second intradiegetic level. The contents of both levels are obviously related: what happens at the second intradiegetic level, within the tale, is of great consequence for what happens at the first extradiegetic level. Sell (1986:487-512) used these concepts in his analysis of *The Miller's Tale* and showed that the two intradiegetic levels are clearly related in Chaucer's *Tales*. At the first intradiegetic level, the pilgrims interact with one another, asking questions, interrupting each other, and discussing the

¹ For a more detailed explanation of these two concepts see Génette (1980).

content of their tales (second intradiegetic level) among themselves. It is precisely the contents of both intradiegetic levels that which determines the relationship established at the extradiegetic level, between speaker/writer and the hearer/ reader. In Sell's own words (1985: 499):

The events at the second intradiegetic level, within his story, are in fact of consequence for relationships at the first intradiegetic level, between the pilgrims. Furthermore, and in somewhat the same fashion, what happens at both intradiegetic levels is of consequence for the extradiegetic relationships between the writer and the reader.

All the levels are, thus, related. In *WBT*, what happens at the second intradiegetic level (the Wife's narration) is clearly linked to the contents of her sermon in the prologue (first intradiegetic level). In fact, the Wife's tale is clearly a parable (exemplum) of what has been said in the prologue. On the other hand, the relation between them both (prologue and tale) is what makes us aware of what the "moral" of the tale is, and what it has to say about women and the relationship between the sexes.

Having made these observations on the context, I will now proceed to the analysis of the tale and its prologue.

3. STUDY OF THE PROLOGUE (FIRST INTRADIEGETIC LEVEL)

As has been said, *WBT* belongs to the *Canterbury Tales* and has a well defined place within the general plan of Chaucer's work. The subject of both the prologue and the tale is the same: the situation of dominance held by the wife over the husband, and the need for this situation to be maintained in order to preserve peace and family harmony.

The prologue contains all the ingredients of a typical sermon of the time: quotations from the Holy Scriptures, from the Church Fathers, from the classics, and references to mythology and astrology. However, all these elements are used in such a way that they achieve effects which are opposite to those

sought by a sermon of the period, the purpose of which would be the edification of the Christian.

In her sermon, the wife of Bath makes a passionate defense of sex and lechery, inviting her listeners to take pleasure in them, and supporting her cause with passages from the Holy Scripture, the meaning of which she interprets (or misinterprets), by means of a series of "sui generis" inferences that the reader, however little he may know of the Bible and exegetics, recognizes at once as having been clearly distorted. An apparent defense of marriage is made (in fact, a justification for sex and lust), with reference to the Bible (advice given by Christ for chastity and virginity), quotations from the Apostle and other picturesque arguments, such as one citing the function of the sexual organs (115-134). It is a grand mixture of theological and biological arguments that help bring out the ironical aspects of the argumentation, and the fact that at no time must it be taken seriously, but simply for what it is: an attempt at using the rhetoric of the sermon for purposes which are very different from those belonging to the period's moral principles on marriage.

The conclusions to be reached from what is said by the goodwife in her sermon, make the reader (or those listening to the goodwife) take all of this with good humor: the Wife of Bath is using all her erudition to support her theories, distorting the meaning of the Holy Scripture, at least in its traditional interpretation, the only one valid at that time. The words used by the pardoner when he interrupts her: "Now, dame, by God and by seint John! Ye been a noble prechour in this cas" (164-65) are a reflection of this irony and of the fact that the audience, to whom the Wife's words are really addressed, is fully aware of it.

It might be asked why the rest of the pilgrims do not take the widow's words seriously. From the point of view of pragmatics, the goodwife violates the Quantity and Quality maxims of the Cooperative Principle, besides that of Manner, in her confused exposition, lack of order and ambiguity. As an example, her version of Christ's meeting with the Samaritan might be cited. Instead of the traditional interpretation -Jesus tells the Samaritan that her

sixth husband is not really her husband, since (we infer) he is her lover- the goodwife states that she does not understand Christ's words, and wrongly assumes that he is not her husband because he is the sixth: "Why is the sixth not her husband? Is it that one can only have five?". For her it is apparently just a question of the number of marriages permitted in a lifetime, not the difference between marriage and cohabitation¹.

Starting from verse 195, the Wife of Bath tells us the story of her marriages; she boasts, in the first place, of how badly she has always treated her husbands, something which is altogether paradoxical in the mouth of a woman, unless that woman is perverse. This has surprised many readers of the tale, as well as scholars. Pedro Guardia (1987: 195) states that Alisoun is a woman who, trying to be feminist, becomes, in fact, antifeminist. One might ask whether the widow's speech is really absurd. In my opinion, it is not so at all; we must bear in mind the pragmatic principle of Irony and, in the light of this principle, interpret the apparent paradox of a woman who speaks badly of women and boasts of faults and bad habits which are generally attributed to the female sex.

Leech (1983: 82) defines the Principle of Irony in the following way:

¹ 'Thou hast yhad fyve husbondes', quod he,
And that ilke man that now hath thee
is noght thin husbonde', thus seyde he certeyn.
What he mente thereby, I kan nat seyn;
But I axe, why that the fifthe man
was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
How manye myghte she have in marriage?
Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age
Upon this nombre diffinicioun.
Men may devyne and glosen, up and down,
But wel I wot, expres, withoute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
That gentil text kan I wel understonde. (17-39)

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If you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which does not overtly conflict with the Politeness Principle, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature.

This is the principle at work in the prologue, strongly linked to the notion of politeness. The satire aimed at the female sex, a recurrent topic in medieval literature, becomes more effective if that criticism is expressed by a woman, and is much more subtle on the part of the writer than if it were expressed either by a male character, (cf. *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*, or directly by remarks made by the narrator.

For those listening to the goodwife tell her tale as well as for us, who are familiar with the mentality of the period, the argument might be as follows:

1. The goodwife boasts of how badly she has treated her husbands (at times, true enough, in return for their meanness or jealousy). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that her behaviour is promiscuous.

2. This behavior is morally objectionable. So says the Apostle St. Paul: wives must be bound to their husbands, and, should the husband die, it is advisable for them not to remarry but rather to remain single¹. Likewise, the Parson, at the end of his tale, in what has been considered as a moralizing conclusion of the entire work, reproaches this type of behaviour².

CONCLUSION

¹ The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier, if she so abide after my judgement: and I think also that I have the spirit of God. (Cor. 7, 39-40)

² Now that a womman sholde be subject to hire hosbonde, that telleth Seint Peter. First, in obedience. And eek, as seith the decree, a womman that is wyf, she hath noon auctoritee to swere ne to bere witnesse withoute leve of hir husbonde, that is hire lord.

The Wife of Bath is, then, an immoral character. Thus, through irony and through implicatures, the satirization of a particular type of woman is achieved, and this woman is represented by the goodwife. Like Satan, in the Anglosaxon poem *Genesis B*, Alisoun becomes likeable as she tells us her complaints and claims her "rights"; yet the public/reader of the period knows well enough that she is going against one of the fundamental principles of traditional morality: a wife must be subject to her husband, as previously cited sources testify and as the woman herself recognizes when she exclaims: "Allas! Allas! that ever love was sinne!" (614).

This set of implicatures is also very clear when the goodwife tells stories of wicked women, which were told to her by her last husband. It would be absurd for her to tell such stories directly since, as a woman herself, she abhors them. Yet, by putting them in the mouth of her husband, their appearance in the tale is justified and the ironical effect increases.

It is precisely one of these stories that brings about the happy outcome of her last marriage, the only successful one. Fed up with the stories that her husband tells her of wicked women, Alisoun destroys one of his books by throwing it into the fire. In a fury, her spouse beats her so hard that the goodwife pretends to die from the fight. Frightened to death at the idea of the crime that he has supposedly committed, the poor man swears to submit to his wife's will if she "decides" to live. The wife finally agrees, and thus ends the narration of her marriages and the prologue of the tale¹.

From the point of view of pragmatics, in deceiving her husband, Alisoun flouts the maxim of Quality of the Cooperative Principle. By doing so, she has

¹ And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,/ and seyde, "Deere suster Alisoun,/ As help me God! I shal thee never smyte./ That I have doon, it is thyself biseke!"/ And yet eft-soones I hitte hym on the cheke,/ And sayde, "Theef, thus muchel am i wreke;/ Now wol I dye, I may no longer speke."/ But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,/ We fille acorded by us selve two./ He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,/ To han the governence of hous and lond,/ And of his tongue, and of his hond also;/ And made hym brenne his book anon right tho. (803-806)

achieved her ends: the power over her own personal environment which society denies her.

4. STUDY OF THE TALE (SECOND INTRADIEGETIC LEVEL)

The tale of the wife of Bath is the account of something that happened long, long ago: "In TH'OLDE dayes of Kyng Arthour/ of which that Britons speken greet honour" (857-58).

I have considered, within the tale, the following units of meaning that organize the macro-structure¹ of the story:

1. A knight rapes a maiden. The initial balance is broken by this act of violence.

2. The young man is denounced, tried and condemned to death by the king.

3. The queen intercedes on his behalf, and the king places the life of the knight in the hands of his wife.

4. The queen asks the young man to solve a riddle: "What is it that women most desire?", in exchange for his life.

5. The young man tries unsuccessfully to find the solution to the riddle, questioning everyone he meets.

6. Finally, a witch offers to give him the answer in return for the young man's promise to grant her whatever she may ask him, if it is in his hands to do so. The young man agrees and the pact is sealed².

7. The queen is pleased by the young man's answer, which saves his life, but the witch, reminding him of his promise, demands that he marry her. The young man has no choice but to accept.

¹ The concept of macro-structure has been taken from Van Dijk (1988).

² The nexte thyng that I require thee,/Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght,/ And I wol telle it yow er it be nyght. (1010-12)

8. On the wedding night, the knight lies beside his wife in desperation. She suggests another alternative: he can choose either to have a young, but unfaithful wife or a wife who is faithful, but old and ugly. Desolate in the face of the two alternatives, the knight refuses to make a choice and grants his wife this power: "I do not fors the wheither of the two; / For as you liketh, it suffiseth me" (1234-35).

9. The witch then turns herself into a young woman, both beautiful and faithful.

The dramatic interest of the tale lies in the fact that the audience/reader knows from the start that the knight is being the victim of a game (perhaps as a revenge for the act committed by him against the opposite sex in the rape of the maiden).

There are two key moments in the account, which are extremely useful for explaining the relation that exists between the prologue and the tale. I will now refer to these.

In her first meeting with the knight, the witch rises and greets him with these words: "Sire Knight, heer forth ne lith no wey" (1001). These words go unnoticed by the knight (second intradiegetic level), who hears only the words spoken afterwards, promising help: "Tell me what that ye seken, by youre fey! / Paraventure it may the bettre be; Thise olde folk kan muchel thyng" (1000-1005). Nevertheless, both for the audience listening to the narrator (first intradiegetic level) and for the readers (extradiegetic level) the crone's first words: "there is no way out through here", do not go unnoticed; they foreshadow the young man's upcoming misfortune, that he will probably be the victim of one of the witch's evil arts¹. Likewise, when the witch imposes her condition, something of a blank check, the young man does not hesitate to accept because, at that moment, the only thing he is interested in is saving his life. However, the audience/reader, contemplating the story from

¹ Something similar happens in the first meeting between the young man and the old man in *The Chaser* (cf. Garcés: 1990).

outside and with a certain perspective, guess that the witch is going to demand something dreadful of the young man in return, which is exactly what happens at the end of the story. Once again, the writer plays with the two narrative levels (two contexts) which I have already referred to. The audience/reader knows more than the young man, and is in a position to infer more. There lies the dramatic tension of the narration, what makes it interesting, "tellable"¹. The writer knows that the reader, with a broader experience in life than the young man's, somehow guesses that the witch is not going to play fair, that she will not give something for nothing, and that she will make the knight pay dearly for her help.

From the perspective of the Principles of Pragmatics, the crone flouts the Quantity maxim of the Cooperation Principle, since she takes advantage of the young man's urgent need to solve the enigma and save his life, something which will make him agree to anything that the witch may ask from him.

At the end of the tale, we find the witch and the knight in bed on their wedding night. When the young man expresses his disgust at the idea of lying with his wife, she proposes a new alternative: if he accepts her as she is, old and ugly, she will be an honest and faithful wife. If, on the contrary, he wishes her to be young and beautiful, she will be so, but also unfaithful. Once again, Chaucer is playing with the two narrative levels (intradiegetic and extradiegetic). The audience/reader is aware that there is a third possibility of synthesis: a young and faithful wife. The witch denies the knight that possibility: a wife can only be faithful if she is old.

The tale comes to a happy ending when, unexpectedly, the young man refuses to go on playing, and gives up his possibility to choose, that is, he gives up his will, and places it in the hands of his shrewd wife, thus implicitly admitting the superiority of female cleverness. Just as the widow in the prologue gains power over her last husband by means of an ingenious trick (by

¹ Cf. Sell (1985) for the concept of "tellability" in the literary text.

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making him believe that she is dying, 805-20), the witch wins the game through deception and cunning.

From the pragmatic perspective, the witch flouts the maxim of Quality of the Cooperative Principle, and the maxim of Tact of the Principle of Politeness, since the choice offered is false and there is no possible gain for the listener; no matter what the young man decides, he will always lose. Moreover, the witch is clearly in a position of superiority with respect to the man, so that he has no choice but not to choose, to relinquish his right to choose (the only truly human right) and to place his fate in the hands of his wife.

5. INTERRELATION BETWEEN THE TWO INTRADIEGETIC LEVELS
(PROLOGUE AND TALE)

There is a clear link between the end of the prologue and the beginning of the tale, which is the dispute between the Friar and the Pardoner, caused by the fact that the latter censures the goodwife for "such a long preamble": "Now, dame' quod he, 'so have I joye or blis, / This is a long preamble of a tale!" (830-31). The host makes peace: "Pees! and that anon!" (850), and urges the goodwife to start the tale. She begins by humbly begging the friar's leave: "Al redy, sire,' quod she, 'right as yow lest,/ if I have licence of this worthy Frere" (854-55), although we can immediately see the irony of this opening, since the very first words of her story are precisely directed against him.

Throughout the tale, Alisoun reminds us, on numerous occasions, with her remarks and asides, that she is the one who is telling the story, which in turn keeps up the prologue/tale relation and assures that the reader does not forget who the narrator is (919-934 ss).

At the semantic level, there are a series of indisputable parallelisms in the prologue and the tale. In both, we are introduced to a man who commits a violent act: he beats his wife (prologue)/ rapes a maiden (tale). The woman (wife, queen, witch), through cunning, by taking advantage of the man's fear, makes him pay dearly for his crime, and finally, achieves control over her family environment, if not in theory, then in fact.

There are rather negative ideas about women expressed by women both in the prologue and the tale. The satirical purpose of the writer is quite clear. Women are not attacked directly, but rather by means of implicatures; Chaucer thus saves face: it is not the writer who criticizes women, but women themselves, in an obvious paradox.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear then, after this analysis, that the prologue and the tale pursue/achieve the same objectives:

a) To present a view of marriage that in practice only works if the wife has power over her husband, against all that is established by traditional moral principles.

b) By means of irony (implicatures), the writer satirizes a particular type of women, represented by the widow of Bath. This type of woman is presented (both in the prologue and in the tale) as ambitious, avid for power, cunning and clever. To many present day readers, some of these characteristics may seem positive attributes. This is just what I was referring to at the beginning of the paper, when I stated that our context as readers of the tale in a particular period varies, as the interpretation of the same also logically varies.

From the Pragmatics approach, the speaker flouts the Quality and Quantity maxims of the Cooperative Principle: the speaker lies to the listener, and the Tact maxim of the Politeness Principle: the listener image is not saved.

c) In the tale (second intradiegetic level), the knight finds himself in a spiral of false alternatives until he no longer has any alternative other than submit to female power. From the pragmatic perspective, the situation referred to by Watzlawick as 'double bind' is one in which the Quality maxim of the Cooperative Principle and the maxim of Tact of the Politeness Principle are flouted, in a situation in which there is a false choice, and the intention of the speaker is to manipulate rather than cooperate.

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