

'Cats or Dogs?'

Questions such as 'cats or dogs?' 'pancakes or waffles?' and 'coffee or tea?' imply the existence of two mutually exclusive categories. I can choose one or the other, but not both. Such questions also fail to account for context: my answer will certainly change depending on what breed the dog is, who has made the waffles, and how strong the coffee is. And yet, both the asker and the answerer intuitively understand that the question is only a game. We are not expected to agonise over our decision.¹ If I declared my preference for cats, nobody would gape in horror if I stopped to pet a golden retriever. In short, the game is nothing short of a linguistic trap; it presents us with two mutually unsatisfactory alternatives—both of which fail to speak to human experience—and forces us to pick just one. There are two options, then, for rebelling against such a game: we can either lament the rules and assumptions of the game itself, or answer in such a way that we reveal the question's very ridiculousness. This essay is interested in the latter response: drawing on Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath* and my own (limited) personal experience, I will argue that the most effective way of 'playing the game' is to take the powerless role that one has been given, and exploit that role to the fullest extent to overcome powerlessness. In doing so, one can play the game in such a way that one changes the game.

In Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*, the Wife is presented with her own version of the 'cats or dogs?' linguistic trap. According to eleventh century clerks and their proverbs, women can either lead virtuous 'hooly seintes lyves' (holy saints' lives) (line 696) or be condemned as treacherous 'wikked wyves' (wicked wives) (1987: 692). Instead of accepting this distorted image of herself, however, the Wife remains shrewdly aware that the reasoning behind her suppression is purely fictive. While proverbs may be invested with the weight of bookish authority, they are nothing more than words, and words, moreover, that have little basis in reality. Yet instead of despairing, the Wife uses this to her advantage: if proverbs are perishable—that is, made of nothing more than air—then they are for that same reason, renewable. In an outrageous yet masterful interpretation of Biblical authority, the Wife fights back by exploiting scripture to justify her own sexual exploits: just as God bid humans to 'wexe and multiplie' (be fruitful and multiply) (28), so too do households require spoons made of both 'gold' and 'tree' (wood) (106-7). While the Wife may convict herself of the very anti-feminist stereotypes she seeks to condemn, she nonetheless creates her subject position, her world, and limitless possibilities using only language; by doing so, she not only rejects the limited possibilities open to women, but forges her own.

This lesson has had practical value in my life. Every Christmas since I was nine-years old, my family and I have held a poker tournament at our kitchen table. While the game is exceedingly tame (we do not bet any actual money), there is still a £200 prize at the end of the night for the most suc-

¹ Except when there is a essay prize at stake, and you cannot buy your family yo-yo's for Christmas for the third year in a row

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successful player. Every Christmas, I lost every hand. And, the more I lost, the greater my ambition became to clean my family out of everything they owned. My pride was not the only thing at stake, however: I had a strong desire to visit the Houghton Library in Boston, and had spent the last two Christmases trying to cobble enough money together to purchase a flight. Yet, there was one problem: my ‘poker face’ is as inscrutable as a blinking neon sign. As my siblings relentlessly delighted to remind me, I faced two unsatisfactory alternatives: I could either admit defeat and face my family’s mockery, or continue playing, inevitably lose, and face yet more mockery.

However, inspired by the Wife of Bath’s cunning manipulation of the ‘game’, I too, began to replot my strategy. After conducting some research, I discovered the technique of ‘edge-sorting’; while there was no way to apply this gainfully to poker, it could nonetheless work like a charm with baccarat. While baccarat is typically a game won or lost on chance rather than skill, ‘edge-sorting’ enables a player to determine whether a face-down card is likely to have a high or low value. During the manufacturing process, cards are often cut in such a way that slightly more pattern shows up on one edge than the other. The left side, for example, may feature a half diamond and the right side a full one.

Of course, identifying this alone does not help; but, my plan was to convince my family to rotate the high-value cards 180 degrees—claiming it was for good luck—so that over the course of the game low cards would gradually become oriented one way, and high cards the other. From there, I could identify the high value cards with ease and adjust my bets accordingly. Over the next few weeks, I drilled myself until I became an expert at this technique. Once I had perfected it, I felt that a ‘rebrand’ was also in order; while I did not want to reveal my plot, I nonetheless wanted my family to sense on some intuitive level that something terrible was about to strike.

First, I began by dressing how I thought an all-powerful, morally dubious baccarat god would dress. I donned my grandmother’s furs, wore two pairs of sunglasses—indoors—and stuffed my pockets with wads of ‘Monopoly’ money.

Next, I started to act like one: I shuffled cards pensively at the kitchen table and sighed profoundly. I hit moving targets at lightning speed with deadly accuracy. To unwind, I crushed hopes and dreams. I lurked, leered, stalked and scowled; I committed heinous crimes and blamed them on my grandmother. One afternoon, I discovered the meaning of life but sold it to the Chinese government. I schemed, scammed, shammed, and swindled; I quickly learned my way around thesaurus.com. I seldom slept, but when I did, I hung like a bat from the ceiling. I bred award winning vipers, sold my brother on eBay, and did *not* place my shopping in the bagging area. Children stopped trusting me when I defied gravity.

Finally, I started to speak like one: ‘When I was last in Vegas...’ I’d begin most sentences. Over time, I noticed that people stopped talking to me.

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On Christmas Eve, I was finally ready, but there was still a catch. I needed to convince my family to switch from a game where they always won and I always lost, to a game where the odds were more evenly balanced. I played on their pity. And they innocently took the bait. I'm tempted to say that that Christmas, after one evening of play, I held the deed to my parents' house and had successfully immiserated my grandparents. Even the neighbours now stood within the realm of my ambitions. But the fact is, I had actually become the most dominant player at the table; at least, until my now distrustful family insisted we all switch back to poker, whereupon I squandered all the money I had won, embarrassingly quickly.

Despite my defeat, I nonetheless felt a strange sense of pride; from then on, I noticed that my family sat up straighter when I entered the room, and my siblings, starstruck, fawned around me with admiration glowing in their eyes.² While I had not won any money, it appeared that in some quarters, I had nonetheless bought some respect. What I learned from this admittedly trivial example, then, was that the two choices my siblings gave me (play, lose and be mocked, or forfeit, lose, and be mocked) were not the only options open to me. As the Wife of Bath recognised, more often than not, barriers are only verbal; expressions like 'cats or dogs?' simply trick one into thinking that there are no other options. By distinguishing what we cannot do, from what we are simply *told* that we cannot do, we can, in turn, achieve what has never before been done.

I would like to end by suggesting that this was, after all, the ethos of our college from the very beginning. By founding one of the first all-female colleges in Oxford, Dorothea Beale not only protested the limited alternatives open to women, but also proved that arguments against women's education had little basis in reality. It is therefore particularly fitting (and convenient) that our college crest features neither a cat nor a dog, but a unicorn—the ultimate symbol of all that had previously been considered impossible.

Bibliography

Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Anthony Burgess (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

² Said glow may have also been seething hatred.