

Characters

The Wife in 'The General Prologue'

Even if you are only studying 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' as a text, it is essential to examine the description of the Wife in 'The General Prologue' as well. This is because the Wife is one of the most completely realised characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, and Chaucer moulds her prologue and tale carefully to suit the character he has set up in advance.

This is how the Wife of Bath is introduced in 'The General Prologue' (lines 447–78). The modernised English version (in italics) is entirely literal, and is given to help clarify the meaning of the passage.

Context

In the Middle Ages, Bath was a centre for the wool industry and was famous for its tightly woven broadcloth. The Cotswold Hills were home to flocks of sheep, which provided the wool, and the nearby port of Bristol increased the opportunities for trade.

A good wif was ther of biside* Bathe *beside
There was a goodwife (woman) from near Bath
But she was somdel* deaf, and that was scathe*. *somewhat *pity
Who was somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt*, *skill
At cloth-making she had such a skill
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.
That she surpassed those of Ypres and Ghent.
In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon
In all the parish there was no woman
That to the offryng bifore hire sholde goon;
Who should precede her in making the offering;
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
Any if anyone did, she was so angry
That she was out of alle charitee.
That it put her out of all charity.
Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground*; *texture
Her kerchiefs were of very fine texture;
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound
I dare swear they weighed ten pounds
That on a Sondag weren upon hir heed.
That she wore on her head on a Sunday.
Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
Her hose were of fine scarlet red,
Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe.
Tightly laced, and her shoes shiny and new.

Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed
of hewe.

*Her face was bold, and fair, and red
of hue.*

She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
She was a worthy woman all her life;
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde
fyve,

*She had married five husbands at the
church door,*

Withouten oother compaignye in
youthe, —
*Not counting other company in her
youth —*

But therof nedeth nat to speke as
nowthe.

*But we don't need to speak of that
now.*

And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
Three times had she been to Jerusalem;

She hadde passed many a straunge* strem;
She had crossed many foreign streams;

At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
She had been to Rome, and Bologna (or Boulogne),

In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
To Santiago in Spain, and to Cologne.

She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.
She knew a lot about wandering by the way.

Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye.
She was gap-toothed, to tell the truth.

Upon an amblere esily she sat,
She sat easily on an ambler,

Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat
Well wimpled, and on her head a hat

As brood as is a bokeler* or a targe*;
As broad as a buckler or a target.

A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,
She had a foot-mantle about her large hips,

And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.
And on her feet a pair of sharp spurs.

In felawshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe*.
In company she knew how to laugh and jest.



An image of the Wife of Bath from a fifteenth-century manuscript (MS Cambridge GG.4.27)

*foreign

* types of shield

*chat

**Of remedies of love she knew per chance,
She knew about love remedies,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce.
Because she knew all about that old game.**

The Wife of Bath is a large, flamboyant, gap-toothed woman with a bold, sanguine complexion. She is rather deaf. She wears bright and prominent clothes — huge headgear, tightly laced red hosiery, shiny new shoes and sharp spurs. She has had a lot of experience of life for a medieval woman. She has had five husbands (she is currently a widow) besides ‘other company in youth’, and has travelled all round Europe on pilgrimages. She insists on social precedence in church, presumably as the highest ranked woman in her parish. She is quick to anger, but also loves laughing and company. She knows all about love and love remedies. She is a skilled cloth maker.

Task 13

Explore the relationship between the character presented in ‘The General Prologue’ and the character of the Wife as she appears in her own prologue and tale. What conclusions can you draw about Chaucer’s narrative method? Did he expect his audience to remember the characteristics of the pilgrim he had described at the start of *The Canterbury Tales*, by the time she comes to tell her own tale?

The physical description immediately provokes responses about the character of the Wife. She is a brazen, pushy woman, with high self-regard and a fondness for the company of men. Attempting to translate some of the lines reveals ambiguities that are clearly deliberate — there is a gap between literal and metaphorical readings. The most famous is the phrase ‘wandringe by the weye’. Does this mean simply that she has travelled a lot, or is there an implication that she strays from the right path? Similarly her knowledge of love remedies might simply indicate a bit of potion-making and being an agony aunt, but there could be a suggestion that she undertakes abortions. Her youthful behaviour could be harmless, or it might be sinful. In this context, her apparently pitiable (physical) deafness could suggest a parallel spiritual deafness, being unwilling or unable to heed proper Christian teaching. Even the gap between her teeth would be seen in medieval times as a sign of lasciviousness. She wears sharp spurs on her heels, which could metaphorically suggest how she treats men as well as her horse. All these uncertainties and ambiguities are richly explored by Chaucer.

The Wife of Bath: medieval and modern

Throughout the study of ‘The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale’ it is essential to keep in mind the fact that medieval audiences would have responded to Chaucer’s stories quite differently from a modern reader. In part this is because they would have encountered the stories differently, probably read aloud to a group. More importantly, their values and expectations would have been different. Essentially, the whole of Chaucer’s audience would have been Catholic. Marriage was one of

the basic sacraments, and the medieval Church's teachings were clear. Marriage was for life (the traditional 'till death us do part'), and had to be undertaken devoutly and for the purpose of begetting children. The Wife of Bath, although not definitely outside the letter of the law, was at odds with its spirit. She seems to treat marriage as an opportunity for self-advancement, she is interested in its sexual rather than its procreative aspect, and she welcomes the opportunity to be widowed and re-married.

The audience may well have been amused by the Wife's outrageous and outspoken views, but they would have been in no doubt that she was flouting the morality and attitudes of the established Church.

The audience's response would also have been conditioned by their views about the place and role of women in society. The medieval Christian view held strongly that women were inferior and subservient to men, both in social and in spiritual terms. In this sense the Wife is even more in conflict with the traditional attitudes of her time, because she champions the cause of women and even argues that they should rule over men — a stance that could well be seen as heretical. Again, the audience would have found this entertaining.

Chaucer's original audience would also have had quite different views from contemporary ones about the nature and role of literature. Almost all medieval literature was expected to have a purpose that is to be something beyond just entertainment. Most commonly, it had a moral or directly religious purpose. Chaucer's tales would be expected to offer moral teaching or guidance, and the Wife of Bath, as a character engaged in a Christian pilgrimage, could be expected to deliver a Christian message. The character herself would be taken more as a type or stereotype; representative rather than individual.

It is evident that the Wife of Bath herself is not delivering a moral message of a traditional kind — rather the opposite. So Chaucer's audience would be looking at her prologue and tale in terms of the author's intentions, and in this regard it is important to remember that this is just one of several of *The Canterbury Tales* that address the theme of marriage. Chaucer seems to present a whole range of opinions and attitudes, and the Wife of Bath's is one of the most extreme. She does not support the traditional view that the man is dominant; she does not even argue for equality between man and wife. For



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The Wife of Bath in a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Canterbury Tales*



her, nothing less than female dominance is acceptable, and both her prologue and her tale carry the same message. Her views would have provoked considerable discussion amongst Chaucer's audience, but it is hard to conceive that Chaucer anticipated many of them endorsing the Wife of Bath's views. The more likely alternative is that much of the audience would have seen the Wife as a representative figure, embodying exactly the kind of vices and faults that so many medieval authorities ascribed to women. The medieval Church blamed Eve for the fall of Man and was deeply misogynistic; for a woman even to claim equality with men would have been unthinkable.

At the same time, it is highly probable that many of the women in Chaucer's audience would have responded positively to the Wife's comments about male behaviour. They would have enjoyed the comedy of her anecdotes about the way she treated her husbands. Few, however, would have gone so far as to wish for the reversal of male and female roles. The Wife's prologue and tale would certainly have invited discussion about the proper relationships between men and women in marriage, and both male and female listeners may have argued the value of a more equal arrangement, as is found in 'The Franklin's Tale'.

A modern audience may approach the text quite differently. For us, literature may be purely entertainment. Certainly, we do not automatically expect to find a deliberate moral or religious message in what we read. We may enjoy the Wife's prologue and tale as a funny and often accurate observation about the way marriages can work out, and how women can overcome the restrictions that society and religion place upon them.

Modern views of characterisation look much more for portrayal of individual characters and characteristics, and it is no surprise that the Wife is one of the most popular of Chaucer's creations. She seems to be fully developed as a character, so that one feels one knows her like a real person, with all her idiosyncrasies and mannerisms. The modern mind is taught to value the uniqueness of the individual, and the Wife of Bath can easily be understood in this way. This approach is beguiling, but is a product of a culture that has gone through the development of psychological realism in the twentieth century.

Equally, our view of the place of women in Western society has changed considerably since Chaucer's time, and indeed within the last 50 years. It is easy to see the Wife as a proto-feminist, correctly challenging all the entrenched doctrines and attitudes of her time and championing the rights of women. Again, this is an attractive interpretation for a culture that has experienced the shift in attitudes and beliefs that have marked the last two centuries and more.

Taking it Further

Look at the representations of the Wife of Bath reproduced in this guide, and compare them with the modern interpretation of the character in the BBC dramatisation of *The Canterbury Tales* (see the *Taking it Further* section on pp. 92–94 of this guide; and the cover of the DVD gives an image of the character which you can find on the internet). How far do you think each interpretation is a good representation of the character?

These different approaches mean that we may emerge with a different understanding of Chaucer's intentions. We may see him as an enlightened and progressive author, challenging all the preconceptions of his age and encouraging radical opinions. That is one of the reasons why Chaucer is the best-known and most popular medieval English writer, because he seems to be as topical in our age as in his own, as Shakespeare does. The differences between likely medieval and modern responses underlie much of the work that you will undertake on 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale'. Remember that there are no clear-cut or 'correct' answers. The willingness to express alternatives or uncertainties is a key aspect of an A-level answer.

Other characters

The other characters in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' may be briefly dealt with, because they are not 'characters' as one might find in more modern, 'realistic' fiction. Instead, they are functional, serving specific purposes according to Chaucer's (and the Wife's) intentions.

In the prologue

The first three husbands

These are not differentiated or individualised at all. The Wife lumps them together as 'goode men, and riche, and olde' (line 197), the latter two being the reasons she marries them. She can dominate and outwit them, and she delights in emphasising their sexual impotence: 'unnethe mighte they the statut holde'. They can offer no resistance or threat to her. Note that the word 'goode' is itself sarcastic; their goodness consists only in the fact that they are rich and likely to die soon.

Her fourth husband

The fourth husband represents resistance to the Wife's will, as he is 'a revelour' and has 'a paramour'. He cannot dominate her, however, and she 'in his owene grece...made him frie', 'for verray jalousie' (lines 486–87). He receives no extended treatment in the prologue and we do not hear his voice. The Wife's callous dismissal of him in line 500, 'it nis but wast to burye him preciously', underlines her contempt.

Jankin

Although Jankin is the only named character apart from the Wife, and forms the subject of a large section of her prologue (lines 503–828), he too is more a stereotype than an individual. There is a traditional

Task 14

It is worth writing down your own response to the Wife early in your study of the text, and again at a later stage when you have much more detailed knowledge. Has your reaction to her changed? Has your opinion of her become more settled, or more ambivalent? You should discuss this at various times with fellow students and your teachers.

representation of the middle-aged woman falling for a young man (she is 40 when they marry, he is 20), 'which that I took for love, and no richesse' (line 526). This gives him power over her, which he exploits with his misogynistic behaviour. He is the representation of medieval misogyny specifically because he possesses a book in which are bound all the major anti-feminist writings of the period, and which 'for his desport he wolde rede alway' (line 670). He thus tries to assert dominance over his wife. This culminates in their fight: he retaliates against her assault, 'and with his fest he smoot me on the heed' (line 795). This is his last act of resistance and he is comically subservient thereafter: 'he yaf me al the bridel in myn hond' (line 813).

In the tale

None of the characters in the tale is named, which immediately indicates that their function is what matters, not their individuality.

The knight

The knight simply represents traditional male power and domination over women, which will be reversed by the end of the tale. After his initial act of rape, he becomes subservient to female characters, first 'the queene and othere ladies' of Arthur's court, then the hag, who is the only person who can save him.

The hag

This supernatural figure, with the power to transform herself into a beautiful woman at the end, is partially an image of the Wife of Bath herself, but more generally the representation of the dominant woman who can behave better than men and who has absolute power over their fate and their behaviour. She is not a consistent character. In part she is counterpart for the Wife in her amused contempt for men, best seen when she criticises her husband's behaviour on their wedding night (lines 1086–95), but she is also a mouthpiece for Chaucer in her long sermon on the virtues of 'gentillesse' (lines 1104–218), which is discussed in the *Summaries and commentaries* section, pp. 19–21 of this guide.

Arthur's court

It is consonant with the whole of 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' that King Arthur himself should submit to the will of his wife and her ladies. Neither he nor they are characterised other than this.

Task 15

Why did Chaucer allow 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' to be so dominated by its narrator?