

**STUDY
REVISE** **AND**
for AS/A-level

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

by Geoffrey Chaucer

- ▼ Written by experienced teachers and examiners
- ▼ Learn how to respond critically to your text
- ▼ In-depth analysis of all aspects of the text

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Using this guide



Why read this guide?

The purposes of this A-level Literature Guide are to enable you to organise your thoughts and responses to the text, to deepen your understanding of key features and aspects, and to help you address the particular requirements of examination questions and non-exam assessment (NEA) tasks in order to obtain the best possible grade. This guide will also prove useful to those of you writing an NEA piece on the text, as it provides a number of summaries, lists, analyses and references to help with the content and construction of the assignment.

Note that teachers and examiners are seeking above all else evidence of an *informed personal response to the text*. A guide such as this can help you to understand the text and form your own opinions, and it can suggest areas to think about – but it cannot replace your own ideas and responses as an informed and autonomous reader.

How to make the most of this guide

You may find it useful to read sections of this guide when you need them, rather than reading it through from start to finish. For example, you may find it helpful to read the 'Contexts' section before you start reading the text, or to read the 'Summaries and commentaries' section in conjunction with the text – whether to back up your first reading of it at school or college or to help you revise. The sections relating to the Assessment Objectives will be especially useful in the weeks leading up to the exam.

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Key elements

This guide is designed to help you raise your achievement in your examination response to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*. It is intended for you to use throughout your AS/A-level English literature course. It will help you when you are studying the play for the first time and also during your revision.

The following features have been used throughout this guide to help you focus your understanding of the play:

Context

Context boxes give contextual evidence that relates directly to particular aspects of the text.

Build critical skills

Broaden your thinking about the text by answering the questions in the **Build critical skills** boxes. These help you to consider your own opinions in order to develop your skills of criticism and analysis.

Taking it further ►

Taking it further boxes suggest and provide further background or illuminating parallels to the text.

CRITICAL VIEW

Critical view boxes highlight a particular critical viewpoint that is relevant to an aspect of the main text. This allows you to develop the higher-level skills needed to come up with your own interpretation of a text.

TASK

Tasks are short and focused. They allow you to engage directly with a particular aspect of the text.

Top ten quotation

A cross-reference to **Top ten quotations** (see p.93 of this guide), where each quotation is accompanied by a commentary that shows why it is important.

Top ten quotation



Characters

Target your thinking

- How far is your response to the Wife conditioned by your attitudes to feminism? (AO1)
- How far does the tale add to the understanding of the Wife that you gained from her prologue? (AO2)
- How far is the Wife of Bath more than a caricature? (AO5)

The Wife

The Wife in *The General Prologue*

Even if you are studying only *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 (on the right) is entirely literal, and is given to help clarify the meaning of the passage.

TASK

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

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.

1 near A good wif was ther of biside¹ Bathe
 2 somewhat But she was somdel² deaf, and that was
 3 pity scathe³.
 Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an
 4 skill haunt⁴,
 She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.
 In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon
 That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;

There was a goodwife (woman) from near Bath
 Who was somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
 At cloth-making she had such a skill
 That she surpassed those of Ypres and Ghent.
 In all the parish there was no woman
 Who should precede her in making the offering;

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.

5 texture Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground⁵;
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound
That on a Sunday weren upon hir heed.
Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and
newe.
Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of
hewe.
She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
Withouten oother compaignye in youthe,—
But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.
And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
6 foreign She hadde passed many a straunge⁶ strem;
At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
She koude muchel of wandrynge by the
weye.
Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye.
Upon an amblere esily she sat,
Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat
7 types
of shield As brood as is a bokeler⁷ or a targe⁷;
A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,
And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.
In felawshipe wel koude she laughe and
8 chat carpe⁸.
Of remedies of love she knew per chance,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce.

And if anyone did, she was so angry,
That it put her out of all charity.
Her kerchiefs were of very fine texture;
I dare swear they weighed ten pounds
That she wore on her head on a Sunday.
Her hose were of fine scarlet red,
Tightly laced, and her shoes shiny and new.
Her face was bold, and fair, and red of hue.
She was a worthy woman all her life:
She had married five husbands at the
church door,
Not counting other company in her youth—
But we don't need to speak of that now.
Three times had she been to Jerusalem;
She had crossed many foreign streams;
She had been to Rome, and Bologna (or
Boulogne),
To Santiago in Spain, and to Cologne.
She knew a lot about wandering by the way.
She was gap-toothed, to tell the truth.
She sat easily on an ambler,
Well wimpled, and on her head a hat
As broad as a buckler or a target;
She had a foot-mantle about her large hips,
And on her feet a pair of sharp spurs.
In company she knew how to laugh and
jest.
She knew about love remedies,
Because she knew all about that old game.

The Wife of Bath, then, is a large, flamboyant, gap-toothed woman with a bold, sanguine or ruddy 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 (and 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.

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 the 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 have been 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.

Medieval and modern interpretations

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 as being 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 morals 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

Build critical skills

Comment on the ways in which the Wife is presented in *The General Prologue*. To what extent does the character presented here reflect the one we meet in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*? Make close references to a range of features.



▲ An image of the Wife of Bath from a fifteenth-century manuscript

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



▲ Claire Benedict as The Wife of Bath in a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Canterbury Tales*

Taking it further ►►

Consider the representations of the Wife in this guide, then compare them with the modern interpretation of the character in the BBC dramatisation (see the 'Taking it further' section of this guide, p.98). To what extent do you think the BBC version successfully captures Chaucer's Wife of Bath?

held strongly that women were inferior and subservient to men, in both social and 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; as 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 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 among Chaucer's audience, but it is hard to conceive that Chaucer anticipated many of them endorsing the Wife's views. The more likely alternative is that many of the audience would have seen her 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 to claim even 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 – 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 the 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 we feel we know 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 it 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.

These different interpretations mean that we may emerge with different understandings 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 – like Shakespeare – he seems to be as topical in our age as in his own. 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 husbands 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 could dominate and outwit them, and she delights in emphasising their sexual impotence: 'unnethe mighte they the statut holde' (line 204). They can offer no resistance or threat to her. Note that the word 'goode' is itself sarcastic; their goodness consists only of 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 was 'a revelour' and had 'a paramour'. He could not dominate her, however, and she

TASK

Write 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? Try to discuss this at various times with fellow students and your teachers.

'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 even though he 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 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 it is their function that 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. She is a 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, page 15 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.

Build critical skills

Why is Jankin the only named character, apart from the Wife, in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*?

Build critical skills

Why is the first description of the Hag 'a fouler wight there may no man devise' (line 999)?