

- Chaucer's Motive
- Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath as his mouthpiece to create a dichotomy between 'experience' (which the Wife claims to have in abundance) and 'auctoritee' (traditionally the Church wielded great authority and was almost as powerful as the government!) within his Medieval society.
- In allowing a character, not least a woman and a bigamist, to openly criticise such an integral part of society, it is unclear if Chaucer was condemning the anti-feminist tradition of the time or voicing a proto-feminist viewpoint.
- The former seems more likely when we consider that the Wife justifies her entire argument for equality with extracts from the Bible, various anti-feminist writers and Jankin's book of 'wikked wyves'.
- However, the 'maistrie' she gains in all of her marriages suggests that even if Chaucer was epitomising a lecherous and deceitful descendant of Eve, he still held her in regard as being a powerful and dominating individual.

- The Wife and her Vulgarity  
The Wife uses sexually explicit images to emphasise her:
- confidence in herself and her assertions (regardless of her immorality)
- lack of regard for the teachings of the Church on reticence and meekness
- sexuality (she essentially uses her Prologue as an advertisement for any potential suitors with wealth, land and a willingness to give her 'maistrie')
- Her ironic, and vulgar, rhetorical questions highlight flaws in the Church's teaching regarding chastity and virginity, flagging them up as outdated and poorly constructed. For instance, she asks how the Church expects to revere virginal young women "if ther were no seed ysowe" (71). The Wife seems to relish making the clergy squirm with her overly suggestive language.
- However, this vulgarity also undermines her argument for equality in marriage because she epitomises the anti-feminist tradition of women being lecherous, lustful, deceitful descendants of Eve.

1349	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Black Death reaches England and kills one third of the population</li> </ul>
1351	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First Statute of Labourers regulates wages in England</li> </ul>
1353	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio finishes his Decameron, a collection of 100 bawdy tales</li> </ul>
1359	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaucer serves in the army in France, under Prince Lionel; he is taken prisoner</li> </ul>
1360	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Edward III pays ransom of £16 for Chaucer's freedom</li> </ul>
1361	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black Death reappears in England</li> </ul>
1362	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English becomes official language in Parliament and Law Courts</li> </ul>
1365	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marries Philippa Pan de Roet</li> </ul>
1375	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sir Gawain and the Green Knight written</li> </ul>
1378	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The beginning of the Great Schism: Urban VI elected Pope in Rome, Clement VII in Avignon</li> </ul>
1381	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peasant's Revolt under Wat Tyler quelled by Richard II</li> </ul>
1386	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard II deprived of power</li> </ul>
1387	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wife Philippa dies. Begins writing The Canterbury Tales</li> </ul>
1400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard II dies in prison.</li> <li>• Death of Chaucer</li> <li>• Population of British Isles c.3.5 million</li> </ul>
1450	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gutenberg produces first printed book in moveable type</li> </ul>

#### Language and Poetry Techniques

Aliteration - Wife sometimes uses aliteration when she is listing; "hors, and houndes" (285) "Spoones and stooles, and al swich housbondrye" (288)

Anaphora - 295 to 300 all but two lines start with "And but thou" or "And to my", Wife uses anaphoras to emphasise the many points she has within her arguments.

Couplet - These are common within the Wife of Bath; "But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,/ God bad us for to wexe and multiplye." (27)

Feminism - "Where can ye saye in any manere age / That hye God defended marriage / By expres word? I praye you, telleth me / Or where he commanded virginitee?" However, I would view the Wife as proto-feminist as she often tries to emulate men to get where she is and is also a male construct (see Susan Crane criticism.)

Hyperbole - "Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground;/ I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound" (General Prologue; 453) - Example of comic hyperbole by Chaucer, as WoB's headdress can't have weighed that much. He's exaggerating her elaborate, rich, over-the-top appearance.

Imagery - Wife uses animal imagery; "Stilbourn I was as a lioness", (637) "for as an hors I koulde byte and whyne".

Machiavellian - Wife lies to gain power over her husbands, a typical example of Machiavellian behaviour; "And al was fals, but that I took witnessse." (382)

#### The Wife, Marriage and the Church

- The Wife is infuriated that the Church views her multiple marriages as acts of bigamy because she did not remarry when any of her wealthy (and old) husbands were alive, but in each case waited until they had died (and gifted her all of their wealth and land).
- The Wife viewed marriage as a predominantly economic arrangement, which is reflected in her description of sexual encounters with her various husbands: when ready one of her husbands could "paye his dette" (153).
- The Wife's contemptuous and satirical views of the Church could have been views also held by Chaucer, as several corrupted religious figures appear in the Canterbury Tales, and the greedy Pardoner and lusty Friar both interrupt the Wife's Prologue with their interjections: the former claims he "was aboute to wedde a wyf" (166) - despite his androgynous appearance and dubious sexuality, and the latter complains that the Wife's Prologue "is a long preamble of a tale!" (831)
- Oddly, the description of the Wife from the General Prologue insinuates that she is a pious and devout pilgrim and churchgoer, yet this appears to be a matter of keeping up appearances as opposed to out of any religious feeling, as her criticisms suggest.

Chaucer's Imagery in the Wife of Bath's Prologue All through 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', Chaucer utilizes symbolism to improve our comprehension of the Wife's character and

standards. Chaucer utilizes basic yet ground-breaking representations, for example, fire and nature to expand our comprehension of the Wife's character. In any case, a portion of the more crucial pictures all through the sonnet creatures and exchange, for instance help depict the Wife's key contentions and thoughts and are utilized to help social analysis all through the content. A considerable lot of these pictures would have been especially appropriate in the medieval setting in which 'The Canterbury Tales' were composed and would have in this manner been helpful in improving the peruser/audience's comprehension of the all-encompassing subjects of the introduction. Examination of the Wife of Bath's preamble uncovers rehearsed utilization of specific analogies which by and large make a distinctive representation of The Wife of Bath's solid and salacious character.



The Wife of Bath begins the Prologue to her tale by establishing herself as an authority on marriage, due to her extensive personal experience with the institution. Since her first marriage at the tender age of twelve, she has had five husbands. She says that many people have criticized her for her numerous marriages, most of them on the basis that Christ went only once to a wedding, at Cana in Galilee. The Wife of Bath has her own views of Scripture and God's plan. She says that men can only guess and interpret what Jesus meant when he told a Samaritan woman that her fifth husband was not her husband. With or without this bit of Scripture, no man has ever been able to give her an exact reply when she asks to know how many husbands a woman may have in her lifetime. God bade us to wax fruitful and multiply, she says, and that is the text that she wholeheartedly endorses. After all, great Old Testament figures, like Abraham, Jacob, and Solomon, enjoyed multiple wives at once. She admits that many great Fathers of the Church have proclaimed the importance of virginity, such as the Apostle Paul. But, she reasons, even if virginity is important, someone must be procreating so that virgins can be created. Leave virginity to the perfect, she says, and let the rest of us use our gifts as best we may—and her gift, doubtless, is her sexual power. She uses this power as an "instrument" to control her husbands.

At this point, the Pardoner interrupts. He is planning to marry soon and worries that his wife will control his body, as the Wife of Bath describes. The Wife of Bath tells him to have patience and to listen to the whole tale to see if it reveals the truth about marriage. Of her five husbands, three have been "good" and two have been "bad." The first three were good, she admits, mostly because they were rich, old, and submissive. She laughs to recall the torments that she put these men through and recounts a typical conversation that she had with her older husbands. She would accuse her husband of having an affair, launching into a tirade in which she would charge him with a bewildering array of accusations. If one of her husbands got drunk, she would claim he said that every wife is out to destroy her husband. He would then feel guilty and give her what she wanted. All of this, the Wife of Bath tells the rest of the pilgrims, was a pack of lies—her husbands never held these opinions, but she made these claims to give them grief. Worse, she would tease her husbands in bed, refusing to give them full satisfaction until they promised her money. She admits proudly to using her verbal and sexual power to bring her husbands to total submission.

WOB tale summary—In the days of King Arthur, the Wife of Bath begins, the isle of Britain was full of fairies and elves. Now, those creatures are gone because their spots have been taken by the friars and other mendicants that seem to fill every nook and cranny of the isle. And though the friars \*\*\*\* women, just as the incubi did in the days of the fairies, the friars only cause women dishonor—the incubi always got them pregnant. In Arthur's court, however, a young, lusty knight comes across a beautiful young maiden one day. Overcome by lust and his sense of his own power, he \*\*\*\*s her. The court is scandalized by the crime and decrees that the knight should be put to death by decapitation. However, Arthur's queen and other ladies of the court intercede on his behalf and ask the king to give him one chance to save his own life. Arthur, wisely obedient to wifely counsel, grants their request. The queen presents the knight with the following challenge: if, within one year, he can discover what women want most in the world and report his findings back to the court, he will keep his life. If he cannot find the answer to the queen's question, or if his answer is wrong, he will lose his head.

The knight sets forth in sorrow. He roams throughout the country, posing the question to every woman he meets. To the knight's dismay, nearly every one of them answers differently. Some claim that women love money best, some honor, some jolliness, some looks, some sex, some remarriage, some flattery, and some say that women most want to be free to do as they wish. Finally, says the Wife, some say that women most want to be considered discreet and secretive, although she argues that such an answer is clearly untrue, since no woman can keep a secret. As proof, she retells Ovid's story of Midas. Midas had two \*\*\*'s ears growing under his hair, which he concealed from everybody except his wife, whom he begged not to disclose his secret. She swore she would not, but the secret burned so much inside her that she ran down to a marsh and whispered her husband's secret to the water. The Wife then says that if her listeners would like to hear how the tale ends, they should read Ovid.

She returns to her story of the knight. When his day of judgment draws near, the knight sorrowfully heads for home. As he rides near a forest, he sees a large group of women dancing and decides to approach them to ask his question. But as he approaches, the group vanishes, and all he can see is an ugly old woman. The woman asks if she can be of help, and the knight explains his predicament and promises to reward her if she can help him. The woman tells the knight that he must pledge himself to her in return for her help, and the knight, having no options left, gladly consents. She then guarantees that his life will be saved.

The knight and the old woman travel together to the court, where, in front of a large audience, the knight tells the queen the answer with which the old woman supplied him: what women most desire is to be in charge of their husbands and lovers. The women agree resoundingly that this is the answer, and the queen spares the knight's life. The old hag comes forth and publicly asks the knight to marry her. The knight cries out in horror. He begs her to take his material possessions rather than his body, but she refuses to yield, and in the end he is forced to consent. The two are married in a small, private wedding and go to bed together the same night. Throughout the entire ordeal, the knight remains miserable.

While in bed, the loathsome hag asks the knight why he is so sad. He replies that he could hardly bear the shame of having such an ugly, lowborn wife. She does not take offense at the insult, but calmly asks him whether real "gentillesse," or noble character, can be hereditary (1109). There have been sons of noble fathers, she argues, who were shameful and villainous, though they shared the same blood. Her family may be poor, but real poverty lies in covetousness, and real riches lie in having little and wanting nothing. She offers the knight a choice: either he can have her be ugly but loyal and good, or he can have her young and fair but also coquettish and unfaithful. The knight ponders in silence. Finally, he replies that he would rather trust her judgment, and he asks her to choose whatever she thinks best. Because the knight's answer gave the woman what she most desired, the authority to choose for herself, she becomes both beautiful and good. The two have a long, happy marriage, and the woman becomes completely obedient to her husband. The Wife of Bath concludes with a plea that Jesus Christ send all women husbands who are young, meek, and fresh in bed, and the grace to outlive their husbands.

H. Marshall Leicester Jr. - "Alisoun is an early feminist striving for autonomy in an oppressive patriarchal society."

Hansen - "anti-feminist views by stereotyping medieval ideas about women as cruel, emotional and sexually voracious."

Yildiz - "her prologue is taken as a revolutionary document for the age in which it was written."

Sally Kinnes - "It is Chaucer's characters who are more memorable than their tales"

Malcolm Hebron - "We might see the Wife as sacrificing her femininity in pursuit of a feminist cause"

Fradenburg - "We must assume the Wife of Bath is based on one or more real women"

S.H. Rigby - "Medieval literature cannot be used directly to read off the reality of medieval social life"

Nicole Smith - "For the Wife of Bath, money, sex and marriage are all interlinked and none can exist without the other"

