

*Guide to Chaucer by Andrew Moore (East Riding, United Kingdom)*

<http://www.shunsley.eril.net/armoore/poetry/wifebath.htm#1>

### **Studying *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale***

In Robinson's edition of the tales, the Wife's is the sixth tale (of twenty-four, including two by Chaucer), while Coghill in his modern version places it fourteenth. In both, her tale (from what is known to scholars as Fragment III, containing Group D of the tales) precedes the Friar's and the Summoner's. In Robinson she follows the Cook, while in Coghill she follows the Pardoner. In both cases, her tale is the first of a group of seven (Wife, Friar, Summoner, Clerk, Merchant, Squire, Franklin) known as the "Marriage Group," as all of them deal with the subject of authority (where it lies and how it is exercised) in married life.

The Wife is unusual in that her prologue is longer than her tale and is far and away the longest prologue Chaucer gives to any storyteller (only the Pardoner comes remotely near her for length). For most tales the prologue is usually an instructive introduction to the tale; here the tale is more of a sequel to the prologue, which is of more interest to the Wife's hearers and us, the modern readers. Like the Pardoner, the Wife tells us much about herself, but her account is almost a full autobiography; it appears, again like the Pardoner's prologue, as a mixture of confession and attempted self-justification.

The Wife speaks directly from her experience of marriage, while her tale is presented as a kind of model illustration of her theories. She has married, while young, three wealthy older husbands; her fourth husband, closer in age to herself, resisted all her attempts to dominate him. But her most bitter struggle has been with her fifth husband, though ultimately, she got the better of him. She has been widowed five times but is eager to find a new husband. Having inherited the wealth of her various husbands, she can now be more choosy, in selecting a new partner. Her account of her own life rings true at every point. In a way it is fitting that her tale should be a fabulous story set in the golden age of King Arthur.

In studying the prologue and tale, you are not required at any time to produce word-for-word translation. You should know the narrative in outline and be able to comment on detail, in terms of the Wife's views or her/Chaucer's poetic technique. In an "Open Book" exam, quotation should be brief, frequent and relevant: there is no credit for long quotation! Close knowledge and clear understanding of the text are certainly required. A series of summaries of parts of the text appears below. This is followed by some more general critical comment, and remarks about the kinds of task you will meet in an examination.

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### **The Portrait of the Wife (from the General Prologue)**

This vivid sketch is one of the most striking in the General Prologue. We learn of the Wife's physical appearance, her dress, her way of life and her character, while Chaucer introduces hints he intends to amplify later in the narrative. Although editions of the Wife's prologue and tale will usually contain the portrait from the General Prologue, in the work as Chaucer intended it to be in its finished state, the portrait would be separated from the Wife's speaking by at least (as in Robinson's edition) five complete tales, with prologues and linking narratives. Thus details are mentioned in the portrait but left unexplained until much later. The most important such detail is the Wife's deafness (explained in line 668 of her prologue). Her "gat-tothed" appearance, then as now, is seen as an indication of sexual energy.

The Wife is not beautiful, but forceful and vivacious. Her bright clothes and elaborate head-dress ("coverchiefs") are ostentatious rather than elegant: her hat is as broad as a "bokeler" (a buckler or small shield). Her clothes are of good quality "fyn scarlet reed" and her shoes are "moiste and newe": the effect is perhaps to advertise herself and her wealth, rather than attempt uncharacteristic finesse.

Of her life we are told that (apart from "oother compaignye in youthe") she has had five husbands, a revelation of which we certainly wish to know more. This means, of course, that she has been five times widowed (no divorce for women in 14<sup>th</sup> century England). This is rather surprising, but seems less so when (in her prologue) we learn that three of the husbands were old men. Her habit of going on pilgrimages suggests a devout woman, but her real reasons for such travel are a love of adventure, and the social opportunities these trips bring. As in the present case, most pilgrims are men (and the few other women present are nuns). One of them might be the next husband for whom she is looking out! The last part of the description tells us of her social skills, especially her knowledge of "remedies of love", an "art" which she well understands.

### **The Wife of Bath's Prologue**

This section contains summaries and (occasionally) comment on the important details in successive sections of the prologue. It is not a full paraphrase, but a way into the text, with which it should be used.

1-8: (numbers refer to lines in the Cambridge University Press edition, ed. James Winny, 1965; revised 1994): The Wife states that, apart from the authority of the Bible, her experience (of five husbands) qualifies her to speak of the "wo that is in mariage". This is to be the theme of what she has to say.

19-104: The Wife attacks arguments (explicit and reasonable or - like her first example - contrived and implausible) from the Bible and the Fathers (ancient writers believed to have authority in the Roman church) which purport to show marriage to be inferior to chastity. She gives contrary arguments, citing the large number of Solomon's wives; showing how St. Paul advises but does not command chastity, and quotes Paul's metaphor of golden and wooden vessels, which can both be serviceable.

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NOTE: St. Paul is the writer of many of the books of the New Testament (traditionally, fourteen letters are ascribed to him, though the authorship of some is now disputed). The second half of the *Acts of the Apostles* is about St. Paul's bringing the gospel to the many parts of the Roman Empire. The relevance of this to the Prologue is that the Wife knows St. Paul's letters. She correctly shows that while St. Paul recommends chastity, for those who can achieve it, the Apostle accepts that it is better to marry than to burn with passion. The passage she alludes to is in St. Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, Chapter 7 (see also *Romans*, Chapter 7).

An interesting question is how the Wife knows this - in Chaucer's time there WAS an unofficial English version of the Bible (translated by Wycliffe and others between 1380 and 1397) but reading it was against the law. F.N. Robinson, in the Oxford University Press edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, notes (p. xxvii) that Chaucer ""can hardly have failed to know Wycliffe"" - but this does not mean Chaucer had read any of Wycliffe's English bible. And even if he had, he gives us no reason to think that the Wife knew it. The only approved version of the Bible was Jerome's Vulgate, in Latin, which was read TO the common people by the priests, if the priests were literate and latinate (some were not). Perhaps she has heard St. Paul's letters read in church or summarized in a sermon, or perhaps she has paid very close attention to what Jankin has said to her. In the Wife of Bath's Prologue, ""the Apostle"" means St. Paul.

105-168: The Wife argues that other virtues than chastity (such as poverty) are not expected to be perfectly achieved by all. She readily admits not to aspire to perfect chastity ("that am nat I"). She argues against the view that the genitals were made merely for "purgacion of urine" and to differentiate the sexes: experience shows them to be made for pleasure and procreation. She has no quarrel with virginity, so long as it is not forced on her: she likens the chaste to bread made of "pured" (refined) flour while those who are married are as (coarser) "barly-breed", with which, in Mark's gospel, Jesus fed a crowd. She insists on her right to use her "instrument frely...bothe eve and morwe", and approves of St. Paul's command to husbands to love their wives. The Pardoner interrupts to thank her for warning him off marriage, but she promptly silences him.

169-233: The Wife warns the Pardoner to expect to hear unpleasant things, advising him, in Ptolemy's proverb, to take heed; he applauds her intention to teach "yonge men" such as himself. The Wife speaks of her five husbands, considering together the first three, good men all, wealthy but too old to satisfy the Wife's voracious sexual appetite. She recalls with glee how hard she made them work to "holde the statut" (their marital obligations). She recalls that she and her husbands, though they tried to appease her with knick-knacks from the fair, would certainly never have qualified for the Dunmow Flich (a side of bacon, awarded annually to the most harmoniously married couple).

234-378: The Wife offers to other "wise wives" (though the only women present are nuns) advice on how (with help from the maid) to manage a husband. She illustrates her advice with a typical verbal assault: in this a husband is accused of meanness over his wife's clothing allowance; of

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lechery with the neighbour's wife and maid; of being suspicious and making drunken accusations of her conduct with other men; of preaching against the dangers of wealth or beauty in women, and against a wife's nagging; of lamenting the fact that wives cannot, like other wares, be sampled before purchase; of complaining of her complaints (that he does not praise her, is rude to her servants and relatives); of suspecting her relations with the apprentice; of hiding the keys to the coffer, and of trying to restrict her movements! (Here she digresses to praise Ptolemy's liberal teaching which she thinks allows promiscuity.) She tells how she would accuse her husband of believing gay attire to be shameless; of likening her to a cat, eager to show its fur; of jealously spying on her (though she boasts that she can outwit his spies); of calling women that "ferthe" (fourth) thing which nobody can endure (a reference to Proverbs, 30,21); of likening women's love to hell, to a parched land, or to wild fire; and, finally (!) of comparing women's love to the parasites which kill trees. Note how the unreasonableness of some of her husband's reproaches conceals the fact that for the most part, she objects to his complaining about things she has really done, and which cannot be defended!

379-450: The Wife boasts of her false accusations, showing how she got the better of her husbands by taking the offensive. She justified her own night-time excursions with the claim that she was spying on her husband's lovers. She prides herself on having, by skill, force and nagging, gained mastery over her husbands, even trading sexual favours for gifts from them. If her husband grew angry, she would first urge him to imitate the legendary patience of Job (a character in the Old Testament), then argue that, as man is more reasonable than woman, he should exercise his reason in indulging her. She would conclude the argument by satisfying her husband's desire: her "bele chose" could make her rich, but she keeps it solely for him.

451-502: The first three husbands have been vaguely and generally depicted above, but here the Wife provides a more definite portrait of the fourth, who was riotous and kept a mistress. Having said this, she breaks off to describe herself as she then was: fun-loving, full of vigour and a wine-bibber whom even the murderous Metellius of classical notoriety could not have deterred from drinking, which made her lecherous - a fact known to some men, who would take advantage of it. Reflecting on her younger days, she laments the passing of beauty and vigour - but, though the flour is gone, she will sell the bran as dearly as she may. She returns to her description of her fourth husband, recalling how she was made jealous by his infidelity, paying him back in like manner, though she claims to have only pretended to illicit affairs. In the end, she claims, her husband was made jealous and felt his shoe pinch. On the Wife's return from a pilgrimage (in Jerusalem) he died and was buried, at no great expense, as she freely admits.

503-586: The Wife speaks at length of her last husband, whom, despite his ill-treatment of her, she loved best of all the five, both for his prowess in bed, and for the difficulty with which his love was won. For, says the Wife, women love best what is hardest to gain. The fifth husband was formerly a student of Oxford, lodging with the Wife's "gossib", Alisoun, to whom she told all her and her (fourth) husband's secrets. One Lent, while he was in London, the Wife had leisure to attend various vigils and processions. Walking in a field with Jankin (Johnny), she dropped a hint that were she free to marry, he should wed her. She commends herself for this insight, not wishing to be like the mouse which has only one hole to which to run, going on to tell of inventing an account of a dream in which Jankin killed her as she lay in bed, telling him that she hoped, nevertheless, that he--would do her good--following, in this matter, her mother's teaching. Realizing that she has lost the thread of her story, she resumes it (though this digression

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is slight, compared to some).