

Geoffrey Chaucer - The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

From September 2012, OCR will be introducing new set texts for unit F663. To support you and your learners through this change, OCR has commissioned senior members of the examining team to write an introduction and guided reading list for each text in Section B. You can choose to use these materials with your learners as you see fit.

Geoffrey Chaucer The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

'A good Wif was ther of biside Bathe'

The Wife of Bath, as soon as she is introduced with her big hat, fine scarlet stockings and five husbands, seems to most readers even more emphatically 'present' than the other Canterbury pilgrims. Often described as 'larger than life', she has burst the bounds of Chaucer's text to enter the culture as a by-word for the irrepressible serially married woman - a figure who lives outside fiction like Falstaff the fat rogue, or Oliver Twist asking for more. In the 1998 television updating she is played by 'national treasure' Julie Walters.

Is she so popular because she seems to be a real, idiosyncratic individual, or because she is a recognisable (and timeless) type? The same question has, less insistently, been asked about many of the pilgrims. The knight, merchant, miller, prioress and others who gather at the Tabard Inn in Southwark in the **General Prologue** certainly have their personal traits. The Host is recognisable as Harry Bailly, the real landlord of the Tabard at the time, and the figure critics call 'Chaucer the pilgrim' must at least partly overlap with Chaucer the poet (though he gives the very least entertaining tales to his in-poem self: a pastiche Romance that can't get started and a long moral treatise). At the same time the travellers conform to the tradition of 'Estates satire', where social types are presented with their characteristic traits and flaws. A knight is expected to be a chivalrous, a miller to give his customers short measure, a summoner implacable, a pardoner mendacious. Medieval literature more widely is full of types, and for some people the Wife's assertive manner typecasts her from the beginning as just a high-profile version of the dangerous, talkative husband-eater of medieval anti-feminist literature.

Debates about whether characters are types or individuals can become fairly circular. No doubt the Wife can be both, or can be one or the other at different points or for different readers. But even whether we choose to call her 'Alysoun' or 'the Wife of Bath' or 'the Wife' can be an index of how individual or otherwise different readers read her - and she has certainly been 'read' in many ways.



AO4 Biographical Context:
Chaucer's Originals

Biographical

Geoffrey Chaucer's great skill with human types (and individuals) stems from the range of social backgrounds with which he was familiar. He was born around 1343, the son of a prosperous wine-merchant. He became a diplomat and administrator - one of his most important and demanding jobs in the 1370s-80s was as a senior customs official, with responsibility for the trade in wool, hides and skins at the Port of London. Though he was not of noble status, he was closely associated with the court. He was personally known to, and rewarded by, Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV. In 1389-91 he was in charge of the upkeep of royal residences. But he spent time lower down the social scale too: with merchants, shipmen, clerks, knights, carpenters, masons. He must have known many a 'noble ecclesiast', and several of his associates were Lollards - followers of John Wyclif seeking radical reform of the Church. Possibly their views contributed to the frequent anticlericalism of *The Canterbury Tales*, including the Wife's Friar-bashing, and her strictures on a celibate clergy (the Lollards were in favour of married priests).

It is possible that something of Chaucer's professional versatility suggests the new social mobility (and job opportunities) which followed the ravages of the Black Death, when about a third of the population of England died. The upwardly mobile outlook of a woman like Alysoun might also reflect these changes.

For further details of Chaucer's social position see Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: a Critical Biography* (1992) and the first five chapters of Derek Brewer, *A New Introduction to Chaucer* (1998).

AO4 Biographical context

Chaucer's Literary Contexts

Links between England and the Continent were strong at this time. The Norman Conquest brought with it interest in territory in Northern France and an historic English claim to the throne of France itself was soon, under Henry V, to be revived. Until very late in the reign of Edward III the language of the Court and its public decrees had been French. It is no surprise that Chaucer's literary outlook was also internationalist. Throughout his career his writings depended on his detailed knowledge of Latin, Italian and French literature. For example, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale* (among his most ambitious works) draw on and adapt Giovanni Boccaccio's Italian verse romance *Il Filostrato* and his epic poem *Teseida* respectively. He may also have read Boccaccio's now best known work, *The Decameron* (c.1348-51), where ten narrators, who have withdrawn to the country to escape the plague in Florence, each tell ten tales. He certainly knew well French poetry of Courtly Love, such as the *Romaunt of the Rose*, which has colonized both the Wife of Bath's imagination and her Tale, and many of the fabliaux and folk-stories which fuel the other *Canterbury Tales* were widespread on the Continent of Europe.

AO4 Literary contexts

Editions and Further Reading

The Cambridge edition by James Winny (revised by Sean Kane and Beverly Winny, 1994) provides serviceable notes. The introduction stresses the Wife's control of irony, sometimes at her own expense. Other useful editions are those by David Kirkham and Valerie Allen (Cambridge School Chaucer, 1998) and Steven Croft (Oxford Student Texts, 2007). The standard edition of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is in Larry D. Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer* (1987 and later editions).

The Norton edition of a selection of Prologues and Tales including the Wife's (edited by V.A. Kolve and Glendinning Olson, 1989), has full appendices for the source material. A good selection of this is also available on the Chaucer pages of <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu>.

Peter G. Beidler's volume for the Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism series (1996) has the text, a critical history, and essays from different perspectives including feminist and psychoanalytical.

Nevill Coghill's modern version of the Tales remains popular. A good parallel text - Middle and Modern English - is given on <http://www.librarius.com>

Probably the most useful secondary reading is the relevant sections of Helen Cooper's *The Canterbury Tales* (2nd edition, Oxford 1996) and Jill Mann's *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge, 2002; first published as Geoffrey Chaucer). Both are incisively written, authoritative critical and contextual studies. Other insightful studies are Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (1985) and Derek Brewer, *A New Introduction to Chaucer* (1998).

The Longman Critical Reader on *Chaucer: the Canterbury Tales* (ed. Steve Ellis, 1998) includes an essay by Arthur Lindley which opens with the salutary reminder that there is no 'Single Key' to unlocking a Canterbury Tale, and that no single critical approach is likely to be sufficient. Readings which present a feminist or anti-feminist Alysoun or Chaucer, or any other single diagnosis, 'share a tendency to reduce one of the most ambiguous, "dialogic" texts in our literature to a "monologic" right reading.'

AO3 Other readings and approaches to text (AO2) and contexts (AO4)

'For myn entente nys but for to pleye'

Alysoun can be seen as a carnivalesque figure. Helen Cooper calls her, with an emphasis on her 'bodily fact', 'Carnival to Jerome's Lent'; Carnival celebrates life while Lent (which follows, and therefore belongs more to decorous age than hot youth) encourages reflection, repentance, austerity. The Wife of Bath is a connoisseur of the choice morsels of her own youth, celebrating her own youthful 'ragerye' or wantonness during her (apparently still unfinished) days of dancing, singing and imbibing (455-9). She dismisses age and self-pity, and remains – despite the odd qualm or tear – 'right myrie' (479), joyously flaunting her 'gaye scarlet gytes' on festive occasions including pilgrimages (555f). When she admires Jankyn's legs as he follows her fourth husband's bier it is almost a Dance of Death in reverse. She follows her 'appetit', not her 'discrecioun', in loving men of all shapes and classes (622-6), and rejoices in the quality and quantity of the sexual demands she makes, though like many sensualists, she draws personal boundaries: she dismisses Phasipha's interests in bestiality as 'horrible lust' (736).

In Mikhail Bakhtin's twentieth century formulation of the carnivalesque, the world is turned upside down as in a carnival or a medieval Feast of Fools. Social hierarchy is temporarily overthrown, often amid riotous laughter, revelry, and indulgence in food, drink and sex. The carnivalesque response to sober moralism is not pointed argument but outrageous vitality. Thus the Wife less often argues with the solemn, misogynistic authorities - St Jerome and his colleagues - than out-talks them. Her husbands are similarly dealt with by bolts of well-directed energy. If an argument terminally offends her, she tears out the guilty page.

She pelts the authorities and her listeners with words much as young medieval Venetians pelted people with eggs at carnival. For her, the Carnival (which properly ends with Shrove Tuesday) continues on into Lent. When others were tightening their belts, she took a shine to Jankyn: Lent took her husband off on a journey, and gave her 'the bettre leysyer for to pleye.'

One advantage of an approach that concentrates on the Wife's abundant *joix-de-vivre* is that the reader can postpone, possibly transcend, some of the moral dilemmas that she raises. Carnival does not endorse or condemn sensuality and disorder so much as recognise them, allow their release: it is Lent's 'other', providing solace after the wilderness of temptation. In this context the pilgrim's enjoyment of their leisurely literary ramble as a social event, an open-air forum for bawdy tales and secular romances, is not necessarily alien to the ultimate spiritual goal of pilgrimage. Vice come out to play in sunlight kisses hands with virtue in fancy dress: Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims include both the drunken Miller and the devout Parson. Masks are also traditionally part of carnival, so possibly the hag's transformation in the Tale can be seen as shedding a kind of magically transforming Carnival disguise.

AO2, AO4

Literary function of 'carnavalesque'

'Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt'

Another approach to Alysoun of Bath sees her not as a proto-Dickensian 'character' or a semi-professional Lady of Misrule but as a figure from a precise historical and social context. Wearing a big hat, or quality kerchiefs which 'I dorste swere . . . weyeden ten pound,' shows that you are a person of some status: on the whole, the more cloth the richer or more important you are in late medieval society, with its dress codes governed by elaborate 'sumptuary laws'. Mary Carruthers, in an article published in 1979, looks at Alysoun as a wealthy clothier (more skilled than 'hem of Ypres and of Gaunt', says the **General Prologue**). She is 'a capitalist entrepreneur' in a trade where many fourteenth century women flourished, many of them widows, and especially in the west of England. Her pre-eminence 'In al the parysshe', bright clothes, and desire for 'lond and . . . tresoor' (204) and husbands may suggest not one 'Wif' but the composite representative of a permanently recognisable social group: the rag-trade manageress on holiday - lippy, materialist, throwing caution to the wind.

A Tart With A Heart ('s Root)

The most important literary source for the Wife of Bath's Prologue (not that much of one is needed) is **Le Roman de la Rose**, begun by Guillaume de Lorris in the 1230s and greatly expanded by Jean de Meun in the 1270s. This is an immense allegorical poem about love. Most medieval writers read it - 200 manuscripts survive - and Chaucer translated part of it. Jean's continuation includes some misogynistic material, bolstered by references to St Jerome, which is a source of many of the remarks in Alysoun's Prologue. Chaucer did not translate this material, but clearly knew it well.

In it **La Vieille**, an old woman sometimes called in English 'the Duenna' or less politely 'the bawd' (this makes clear she is a retired prostitute), gives advice on how a woman should deal with men, drawing on her own full experience. 'For half so boldely can ther no man / Swere and lyen as a womman can' (**Wife of Bath's Prologue** 227-8) is one of many direct translations from the **Roman**. Both women lament the effect of the ageing process; both console themselves with memories of their 'yowthe, and . . . jolitee' (470), but Alysoun recovers more quickly from her melancholy moment and seems much less less cynical, less damaged (in spite of her boxed ear, which is after all a kind of love-bite) than **La Vieille**. The most beautiful bittersweet lines in the poem - some of the most evocative in all Chaucer - are almost a direct lift from Jean de Meun. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer knew when not to amend, or augment, his material:

But, lord crist! whan that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.
Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote
That I have had my world as in my tyme.

AO2 Literary source

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale as part of The Canterbury Tales

The idea of an inner sequence of 'Marriage Tales' within Chaucer's great narrative sequence was first popularized by G.L. Kittredge in 1912. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is the first of the thematic grouping he identified. She starts the debate on 'sovereynetee' in marriage with a sermon, and continues it with her Tale of the morally reconditioned knight. Then the Clerk, piqued by her claim that it is impossible for a clerk to speak well of any woman except in saint's lives (688-91), follows on with the tale of Grisylde, supreme Medieval example of the long-suffering good woman. The Merchant continues, speaking of his own woes in marriage and telling a tale about female deceptiveness and cunning. The Franklin's story, which winds up the so-called 'Marriage Group', and apparently ends the debate with a kind of synthesis, stresses mutuality in relationships in the 'free spirit' of chivalrous love: 'Love wol nat ben constreyned by maistrye.' During the course of the Tale the Franklin takes up and sophisticates a number of concepts familiar to the Wife: 'maistrye', 'sovereynetee', 'trouthe', 'gentillesse'. More recent critics tend to be cautious about accepting this grouping as Kittredge defined it, both because the Tales in question have many concerns besides marriage, and because a number of other Tales ostensibly outside Kittredge's group also contribute to the theme. The 'Marriage Tales' model does, however, help to emphasise again that debate, not didactic presentation or even wise synthesis, is central to The Canterbury Tales. The different perspectives of people of different class, gender, profession and disposition contribute to this debate, as do the different contexts of romance, fabliau and other genres. The Wife's voice, though emphatic, remains just one among many.

Medieval marriage: lying down before the master?

Whether one accepts the 'Marriage Group' as a strict or loose arrangement within the Canterbury Tales, issues of restraint and control, dominance and submission, regularly recur. Who should take charge in marriage, man or woman? Absolutely, or in accord with a sliding scale? Should, moreover, either human partner ever claim to rule within what is after all a divine institution?

As the General Prologue shows, writing recommending the subordination of women in marriage was widely available in the middle ages. Some of it makes the Wife's draconian St Jerome sound almost moderate: in marriage women would do well to study the example of dogs, an elderly husband instructs his young wife in a French volume written in the early 1390s and translated by Eileen Power as *The Goodman of Paris*. The greyhound or mastiff 'ever keepeth him close to the person from whom he taketh his food and leaveth all the others and is distant and shy with them; . . . even if his master whip him and throw stones at him, the dog followeth, wagging his tail and lying down before his master to appease him.'

Some people did see marriage in more equal terms. Love in *The Testament of Love* (c.1385), by Chaucer's contemporary Thomas Usk, describes it as a process in which two people who originally were somewhat 'discordaunt, hygher that one and lower that other' achieve the same level. Relationships, besides, do not necessarily follow theory. Women, as shown by Carruthers and other scholars, did hold positions of authority whatever some text-books decreed. There was room in life, as in the Tales, for a wide range of different experiences of, as well as theories about, love and marriage.

For relevant writings see *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: a Sourcebook*, edited by Conor McCarthy (2004). Christopher Brooke's *Medieval Marriage* (1989) includes a chapter on Chaucer.

AO2, AO4
The Canterbury Tales
themselves as context

AO4 Social context

Chaucer's Women

Alysoun of Bath is not the only powerful female on Chaucer's pilgrimage. The Prioress, delicate, well-mannered, sensitive - rather finicky, perhaps, is an obvious counterpoint of Alysoun. And the pattern of contrast repeats with high-profile women inside the Tales the pilgrims tell. The Clerk's patient Grisylde is an example of this, as is Constance the unyielding servant of God in *The Man of Law's Tale*. The courtly Emilye in *The Knight's Tale* must, like Alysoun, choose between two passionate suitors, but she has much less freedom than the Wife: fate, the gods and politics all make life more complicated than it is in Bath. Alysoun has more in common with Proserpyna, the fairy-queen who, at the climax of *The Merchant's Tale*, out-argues her misogynist husband Pluto. She goes on to supply 'fresshe May' with an outrageous but successful excuse as to why she appears to be having sex up a pear-tree with her old husband's young squire. May herself does resemble, arguably, a much earlier version of Alysoun: selfseeking, devious, bawdy, a veritable force of nature.

AO4 Social context

'If women had written stories': Chaucer as Feminist?

The Wife of Bath's Prologue may be a compendium of anti-feminist books, especially St Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, but the Wife skilfully adapts, distorts or challenges such sources at every turn. Her notion of discussion is a sort of rough sporting contest, with lots of verbal shouldering and jostling, and woe to the vanquished: 'Cacche whoso may, who rennet best let see' (l. 76). She delights in emphasis, often plain repetition, using it in the spirit in which a roller repeatedly traverses the same patch of ground (ll. 127-8; 133-4). Not for nothing do Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* welcome Alysoun as an early anti-patriarchal champion. In the *General Prologue* she wears sharp spurs and in the illustrations to the Ellesmere and Cambridge manuscripts she wields a whip - she claims to be one herself in line 175 of her Prologue. If she is an 'expert in al myn age' on the 'tribulacion in marriage (ll. 173-74)' it is partly because she knows, and knows how to cudgel into place, all the relevant arguments.

But another critical tradition says that to celebrate the Wife's boisterous skills as advocate of the woman's cause is to read unhistorically - to ignore the implications of maltreating antique Jerome and his modern disciple Jankyn. The best known, most extreme version of this view is D.W. Robertson's (*A Preface to Chaucer*, 1962). Robertson believes that the Wife is presented as a 'carnal monster'. Chaucer's audience, Robertson claims, would have recognised her distortions of scripture, in detail and with disgust. They would have noticed, for instance, the way her use of the example of Solomon and his wives ignores the statement in 3 Kings 11 that 'the women turned away his heart' from God. Alysoun's famous deafness is metaphorical as well as literal. It should be linked to Psalms 113:14: 'although she has ears, she hears no' true doctrine. The clear message, for Robertson, is that 'He who allows his wife to dominate him will be served as the wife of Bath seeks to serve her husbands' and similarly 'He who allows the flesh to dominate the spirit will find it a tyrant like the wife'.

It isn't just historicist (or new historicist) academics who are sceptical about the idea that Chaucer's poem stands up for women. Chaucer lived in a patriarchal society and the Wife can be seen as pounded into shrill extremism by a lifetime combating such misogyny, a monstrous talker who owes something to Mrs Noah, the loud comic 'shrew' of the Mystery Plays. Elaine Tuttle Hansen detects masochism in Alysoun's relationship with Jankyn, their sudden reconciliation suggesting 'the persistence of those self-deluding hopes of reconciliation that battered wives so often express.' Other readers take a middle way (or have it both ways). Jill Mann in *Feminizing Chaucer*, for instance, argues that her tirade is a simultaneous demonstration both of female bullying and of salutary witness to male oppression. In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Canterbury Tales* Mann further suggests that Chaucer 'gives the old stereotype a new twist, by showing that antifeminist literature ... produces the angry woman that it purports only to describe.'

AO4 Social context
AO3 Different approaches
to meaning

'I suffer not a woman to teach': Preaching a Prologue

'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man' declares St Paul in 1 Timothy 2.12; long after Chaucer's time Samuel Johnson is said to have observed that 'a woman preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all'. Chaucer's audience may well have been suspicious of a woman who deploys her 'auctoritees' as fluently as a preacher. She cites any source that will prove her point and creatively adapts material which ostensibly will not. For instance, the arguments of those who condemn women most vehemently in Theophrastus' *De Nuptiis* are put in the mouths of (literally) toothless old men. Potentially subversive, too, is her emphasis on 'Experience' - her emphatically-placed opening word - versus 'auctoritee'. In line 576 she cites, not a learned volume by a man, but the 'soutiltee' which 'My dame taughte me'. It may be significant that it is the Pardoner, when he interrupts her, who calls the Wife 'a noble prechour' (165). His own Prologue is a cynical celebration of his expertise in manipulating the people he preaches to.

But the Wife's Prologue is not simply a sermon. It can be described variously as 'an autobiography, a confession, a lecture, a sermon, a harangue' (Peter G. Beidler). It conforms to no one genre. The Wife's blunt references to her 'queynte' and more insinuating ones to her *bele chose/quoniam* 'privee place' (and how she made her old husbands 'swynke') sound as if they come from a fabliau, but she is more self-aware, a subtler ironist, and much more learned, than speakers like the Miller or the Reeve. She is involved in some literally knock-about humour in the fight with Jankyn, but that is a fight about a book, about ideas.

The Pardoner's attempt to foreclose the Wife's sermon by flattering her preaching abilities is not a success. It only confirms her unstoppable momentum. Having had the temerity to speak, he is warned that she has hardly begun (at a point where pilgrims other than Wife and Pardoner have long launched into their tales). It is six hundred lines before Friar, Summoner and Host interrupt her again, squashing a few lines of banter into the gap between Prologue and Tale. In the mean time she has spoken much, quoted much dialogue within her monologue, and asked many a (rhetorical?) question. She is revealed by what she says, and what she fails to say, performing not directly for us readers but for a quizzical, possibly judgemental audience of pilgrims in the poem, rather like the much later speakers in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. Her repeated 'thou seyst' reminds us that she is putting words in the mouths of her old husbands - who are in fact, we get the impression, being prevented from 'saying' anything. And her failure to mention any children of her five marriages may be significant. Since procreation was the main point of marriage according to the church, this may suggest the barrenness of her approach. Certainly it stresses her independence.

AO2 Approaches to
the monologue form

'Now wol I seye my tale': Teller and Tale

Sometimes the reader of *The Canterbury Tales* is aware, often through the subtle play of irony, not only of the teller behind the tale, but of the persona of Chaucer the pilgrim behind the teller and Chaucer the poet behind him. This structure tends to resist dogmatic certainties, the more so because it is by no means rigidly applied: some of the poems seem better tailored to their speakers than others; sometimes who is speaking seems unimportant and sometimes attention is explicitly drawn to it. The bumptious, quarrelsome Miller and Reeve tell crude stories at each other's expense and the Miller, already drunk, nods in the Host's direction by blaming 'the ale of Southwerk' for what he is about to say. The Wife of Bath, similarly, is satirical at the expense of the Friar at the beginning of her Tale, and we may imagine the blushes of the modest Clerk when she talks about the sexually active, assertive and violent clerk Jankyn. There are memorable interludes between Tales, where the Host reproves, or subdues or cajoles individual pilgrims in ripe language. But cross-reference between tales is occasional, not systematic. The novelistic (as it were) purpose of Chaucer's pilgrimage moves in and out of focus.

The Tale that is Told

The Wife of Bath's Tale is much shorter than her Prologue, less mixed in genre, less quirky. For a time (after a characteristic digressive start) it speeds along in conventional romance fashion: a knight comes from hunting fowl, rapes a maid, is condemned but then handed over to a woman's tricky clemency, sets off on a quest, sees some magical dancing. Like other knights before him, he must find the answer to a question. No doubt he will succeed. But then events become less predictable. He passes the first test easily enough, giving the right answer on the appointed day, but it turns out not to be the important test. Now the knight is confronted by a 'loathly lady' who forces him to act less unthinkingly. The pace of the tale slows for reflection and is stuffed with moral reflections on true gentility, the respect due to honest poverty and wise old age. In short he is treated to a compulsory lecture, packed with supporting evidence from Major Authors (the Medieval mania for 'auctoritee'). He is instructed by a woman as to what he, as a knight, should have known and acted on. He reflects, repents, accepts the 'maistrye' of the wise old lady he has wedded: and finds her miraculously renewed, and 'so yong' he can bathe in a bath of bliss.

AO2 literary form
AO3 different approaches to the relationship between Wife and Tale

A Tale Fit for Alysoun?

A female narrator is unusual in romance. This (by any standards) short Romance also gives a female character an unusually long speech, and the knight sets off on his quest not at King Arthour's instigation but that of his Queen. Some people see this as feminism in action before its time; others, some of them reminding us that the author was male, see the Tale simply as Alysoun's wish-fulfilment: the old woman regains her youth and catches a young lover on her own terms. Some commentators go even further, arguing that after the combative, even banner-waving Prologue, the Tale is – in feminist terms - a disappointing climb-down. Does the fact that the former hag finally 'obeyed [the knight] in every thyng/That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng' (1255-6) mean, as Helen Cooper provocatively suggests, that the Wife is 'an incurable romantic, a secret Mills and Boon addict'? Perhaps she is just being consistent: she has always wanted dominance not for its own sake but as a means to achieve a more equitable situation within marriage - as in her final relationship with Jankyn, as well as highlighting the happiness of the the newly-weds in the Tale. Derek Pearsall floats the more brutal possibility that 'the lines mean simply that she was sexually obliging once she had got what she wanted.'

A related question is why she chooses to set her tale in the days of 'fayerye'? Is this another sign of the 'incurable romantic'? Jill Mann maintains that such miraculous transformations - the old wife's physical change no more miraculous than the former rapist's into a submissive husband - can only be told as a fairy-tale. The tale 'is not to be interpreted in realistic terms as a serious proposal for the rehabilitation of sexual offender' but, in fairy-tale tradition, as 'a vision of the way things might be'. Thus a fantasy is a reasonably appropriate format for the Wife to choose: its indirections suit not only the latent escapism of her character, but the elusiveness of the idealism she is (perhaps uncharacteristically) attempting to pursue.

Will This Do?

A simpler explanation is that, despite Chaucer's best, brief efforts at joinery, the Tale doesn't quite dovetail with its teller after all. It is actually much harder to explore intimate and detailed connections between the Wife as teller and her Tale than it is in the cases where Tale is bound organically, syllable by syllable, to its purveyor: the Prioress's, for instance, where the luridness of her bloodthirsty anti-Semitic story contrasts strongly with the squeamish, often elliptical way she tells it, suggesting a continuous shuttle between her composed outward demeanour and her repressed feelings and desires.

We might expect from the lengthy exposure of her character that the Wife of Bath will tell a coarse, funny tale or fabliau. *The Shipman's Tale* - a fabliau where a woman triumphantly deceives her husband - would seem ideal for her, and most scholars think it originally intended to be hers. Instead we get a fable from Romance, possibly from stock: engineered so that time-blasted ladies can get their heart's desire by locking onto a beloved, if fallible, boy and giving him what she thinks he needs. It is, of course, possible to relate the Tale the Wife does tell to many aspects of her interests and character as expressed in the Prologue: to her preference for docile male behaviour, her interest in women claiming 'Maistrye' in marriage, for them telling it like it is (the Midas anecdote), and her resentment at clerical exploitation of the people (the attack on Friars). Most readers agree without question that Alysoun of Bath is intended to register as the speaker especially of the opening passages and conclusion of the Tale, which are neatly adapted to her. Passages like the account of the court of love and (particularly) the lecture on 'gentillesse', which is almost worthy of the Parson, seem less characteristic, as though the Tale may have been bespoke for some other purpose.

AO2 literary form
AO3 different approaches to the
relationship between Wife and Tale

Loathly ladies

The 'loathly' or 'loathsome' lady, who becomes beautiful if she or the man fulfils certain conditions, occurs quite often in folklore. (Male equivalents, Derek Pearsall points out, are Beauty's Beast or the Frog Prince). The closest analogue, or possibly source, for the version of the lady in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is the verse tale of Florent by Chaucer's friend John Gower in his *Confessio amantis*. The differences between the two Tales are instructive. In Gower as in Chaucer the knight must answer a question about what women most desire - sovereignty again - and marry the old woman who gave him the life-saving answer. As in most other 'loathly lady' tales, but not in Chaucer, the transformation is not dependent on the moral progress of the knight, who is, and remains an unrepentant killer: all that really matters is that he should prove his courtesy through demonstrative obedience. She offers him a choice of having her foul by day and fair by night or vice versa, not Chaucer's more intriguing and surely more realist choice of on the one hand 'foul' and 'trewe', on the other fair and sought after by other men. The other obvious difference is that Chaucer's fantasy gives the hag much more scope for her developing desires. She is not, like Gower's Proserpina figure, forced to change nature as night shifts to day, but beautiful and ugly at will, and whenever she wants a change she can ring it. That, certainly, is very like the Wife of Bath! In short the interface between fantasy and reality is less distinct in Chaucer, closer to our outer world.

This remains at bottom, however (for many readers quite satisfyingly) intractably archetypal material, where nothing is ever quite what it seems, and which seems only imperfectly restrained by the limits of Chaucer's modest narrative. One side of the loathly lady manifests as a primal threat to masculinity, the other as a dark embodiment of female frustration and fear. As Gilbert and Gubar put it, 'five centuries later, the threat of the hag, the monster, the witch, the madwoman, still lurks behind the compliant paragon of women's stories.'

AO2 literary form

Adaptations, performances, rewritings

John Dryden's witty, urbane retelling of the Tale is in his *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700). He does not tackle the Prologue; such material would have won him 'as many Friends and Readers, as there are Beaux and Ladies of Pleasure in the Town' but would 'offend against Good Manners'. Such concerns are less apparent in *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, a seventeenth-century ballad in which the heroine dies and arrives at the gates of Heaven. Here, irrepressible as ever, she lectures people like Adam and St Paul, who don't want to let her in, about their sins.

The Wife of Bath is a wonderful talker. Of the readings available in Middle English on CD the most readily available are those by Trevor Eaton (the celebrated 'Chaucer Man', who recorded Prologue and Tale in 1995) and Elizabeth Salter's for Cambridge University Press (1999). It might be instructive to listen to both, to gauge the difference between a female speaker and the contrasting effect of Prologue and Tale mediated through an ironic 'Chaucerian' narrator. An earlier version by Cecily Longrigg for Tellways may just be met with secondhand. In the lively 1998 animated film of *The Canterbury Tales* – a good introduction to the work in modern English – Billie Whitelaw voices the Wife and Liz Smith the hag.

On screen, Laura Betti is the exuberant, dominant Wife in the sixth section of Pasolini's cranky *Canterbury Tales* film (1972). Her fourth husband is seen expiring from sexual over-work, Jankyn is wooed at a fertility rite, and she is less inspired by his legs in church than by his privy member, seen through a crack in the paneling. Tom Baker plays Jankyn, three years before *Dr Who*, reading from his 'book of wikked wyves' in a fruity, exasperated voice. As with the rest of this film (Cert 15), nudity and crudity are very much part of Pasolini's view of the exuberance of the middle ages, and it is advisable to preview extracts before using them with a class.

A witty and appropriately insouciant take on the Wife is provided in the BBC *Wife of Bath* (2003), adapted by Sally Wainwright, using modern dialogue.

AO3 Performance
as interpretation

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