

# WIFE OF BATH

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

**Wife of Bath** (in Chaucer's **Prologue to her Tale** and in her **Tale**) Extravert

**Overview** Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of 22 plus tales, purportedly narrated by pilgrims on their way to worship at the Shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in his Cathedral in 1170. In these tales, written in the last decade of his life, Chaucer created a wide spectrum of social and cultural types, drawn from his imagination but based on a lifelong observation of the human landscape of his time. His initial intent was to write 120 tales in the sequence, which indicates how broad his ambition was.

**Character** The Wife of Bath herself comes down to us as a lusty and dominant extravert, and delights us with her audacious energy for life. She is a Moll Flanders or Fanny Hill, happy with sex, dominant over her men—she marries five times—and lover of life's appetites. However Christian tradition, in which Chaucer was writing, had long viewed marriage as a necessary evil, nothing more, and looked down on sexuality. The Wife of Bath, therefore, reads as a delight to us, though to Chaucer she is something more complex: a delightful but abusively sensuous character.

**Parallels** The Wife of Bath does not match up easily, for her blend of **extravert** lustiness with defence of womanly rights clouds over the border between Feminism and the realm of women delighting in heterosexual pleasure. The latter delights get pronounced expression in literary characters like Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) or in the yet lustier *Fanny Hill* (1748) while a bias toward female independence from male-led social-sexual repression is among the Feminists often combined with a stress on Female sexual fulfillment. (Cf. this blended perspective in Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) or in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which urges women to free themselves from the fake belief that they can be fully realized as housewives.)

## Illustrative moments

**1 Husband-loving** In the *Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale*, The Wife comes on boldly with a defence of her own marital life. She harks back to the saying of Jesus, to the Samaritan woman at the well, that she has had five husbands, 'and he whom now thou hast is not thy husband.' With all respect to the Christ, the Wife of Bath asks what evidence there is for a numerical limit on husbands? Why is she subject to criticism for having had five husbands? Bustuous and lusty, she swings forth right and left, with her defence of marriage and—what God commanded—the multiplying of souls. She is extraverted in the name of God.

**2 Lusty** In defending marriage—countering St. Paul's adage that it is better to be celibate than to marry—The Wife of Bath refers to the physical difference between the sexes, and asks why that difference should be so pronounced if we were not intended to procreate? Men are bound to pay their wives their due, and 'with whatever else would he make payment if he didn't use his little instrument?' 'I mean to use my gadget, as generously as my Maker gave it,' she concludes, hiding nothing, exulting in her directness. She piously cites St. Paul's admonition that husbands should follow the wishes of their wives.

**3 Scheming** The Wife of Bath devotes a lengthy peroration to the power of a smart woman in marriage. She herself has had two aged husbands, who were sexually lifeless, and she has doted on the inheritance she will have from them. And of course, as she adds, the smart wife can have other men in a pinch: 'for any astute wife, who knows what's what, can make her husband think that black is white, with her own maid as witness in support.' Robust sexual love makes the

best marriage, but if the cards don't fall that way, don't sulk: look around, or wait for the inheritance.

4 **Hard-headed** Sexual politics in the bed is right up the Wife of Bath's alley. Much as she likes to use 'her little gadget,' she must think foremost of the economics of marriage. 'I wouldn't stop a moment in the bed, if I felt my husband's arm over my side...no, not until his ransom had been paid.' This she says in speaking of her fourth husband, but at that point the Wife of Bath wanders on to the question of age, and of her own loss of bloom. In other words a sadness enters her lustiness. 'But age, alas, that cankers everything, has stripped me of my beauty and spirit.'

### **Discussion questions**

Does it make sense to view the Wife of Bath in terms of mediaeval anti-woman literature, which picked up the Biblical argument that marriage and sex should best be avoided? Does the Wife seem to be answering that perspective, as it is found, say, in Saint Paul?

How does the Wife view her husbands? Did she love some of them? Was she on the whole a 'loving person'?

Is the Wife of Bath? Can you imagine a dialogue between Germaine Greer, a leading American feminist (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970), and The Wife of Bath? What would be their leading points of disagreement?