

# [Chaucer’s imagery in the wife of bath’s prologue](https://assignbuster.com/chaucers-imagery-in-the-wife-of-baths-prologue/)

Throughout ‘ The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, Chaucer uses imagery to enhance our understanding of the Wife’s character and principles. Chaucer makes use of simple yet powerful metaphors such as fire and nature to augment our understanding of the Wife’s personality. However, some of the more fundamental images throughout the poem – animals and trade, for example – help portray the Wife’s key arguments and ideas and are used to aid social commentary throughout the text. Many of these images would have been particularly pertinent in the medieval context in which ‘ The Canterbury Tales’ were written and would have therefore been useful in enhancing the reader/ listener’s understanding of the overarching themes of the prologue.

Analysis of the Wife of Bath’s prologue reveals repeated use of certain metaphors which collectively create a vivid illustration of The Wife of Bath’s strong and lustful personality. For example, the idea of fire is regularly associated with the Wife e. g. ‘ Better is to be wedded than to brinne.’ Here, Chaucer is making use of a biblical citation which the Wife uses to excuse her multiple marriages; the verb ‘ brinne’ refers to an uncontrollable passion which the medieval society and church would deem inappropriate. The Wife acknowledges harbouring this passion therefore recognising her lustful nature; her admittance of it reveals to the reader the boldness of her character, she is not ashamed to admit she is lustful even though society deemed it disgraceful. This imagery of fire recurs throughout the text, for example, ‘ for peril is bothe fyr and tow t’assemble.’ In terms of the wider significance of this fire imagery, it is debatable whether Chaucer uses it in order to create a character who complies with the medieval stereotype of women as lustful therefore conveying a largely anti-feminist message, or whether through the Wife’s lack of shame over her fiery and passionate personality, he is suggesting that this is not something that society should condemn.

Chaucer, through the Wife, regularly makes use of imagery of nature, specifically seed, fruit and flowers, as a symbol for the Wife’s sexual activities; she excuses her numerous sexual relationships by reconciling them with something natural. For instance, she observes that ‘ if ther were no seed ysowe, virginitee, than whereof sholde it grow?’ Here the wife uses the metaphor of the seed to demonstrate how if everyone practised chastity, there would be no people and hence no seed for virginity to grow from. She logically uses the analogy of something natural in order to excuse her own actions. The Wife also makes many references to flowers and fruit when describing her sexual relations: ‘ I wil bistowe the flour of al myn age, in the actes and in the fruit of marriage.’ Again, the wife uses images of nature in a euphemistic sense but also to reconcile her sexual actions with something natural and therefore acceptable.

In the context of Middle Ages England, the sciences of astrology and physiognomy were largely accepted as giving insight into the character and tendencies of a person. Throughout the Wife of Bath’s prologue, Chaucer responds to the popularity of the two disciplines by highlighting specific details of the Wife’s image and her astrological signs to communicate to the audience various aspects of her personality. For example, we are informed that the Wife’s character is influenced by both Mars, the God of war and Venus, the Goddess of love and beauty and this, she and a medieval audience would believe, meant that ‘ Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse and Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse.’ In addition, she is described as being ‘ gat toothed’ which indicated a lecherous and bold personality. She is also eager to point out her birthmark in a ‘ privee place’ which physiognomists believed demonstrated a voracious sexual nature. Chaucer therefore uses the Wife’s own image to communicate aspects of her personality.

Perhaps the most constant imagery throughout the text is that of animals which the Wife uses, almost entirely, to describe women. Many would argue that this is a strong feminist response to the comparison with women to animals in Theophrastus’ ‘ Liber aureoles de nuptiis’, a prominent piece of anti-feminist literature which Alison cites and mocks throughout the text. In a medieval society, it was widely believed that women came after men in the creation hierarchy followed swiftly by animals. This placed women close animals in the ‘ chain of being’ and they were often unflatteringly compared to them e. g. by Theophrastus: ‘ Horses, asses, cattle… are first tried and then bought: a wife is the only thing that is not shown before she is married.’ However, Chaucer, through the Wife of Bath, flips the imagery, comparing women with animals in a flattering and positive way. For example, Alison claims that she was as ‘ joly as a pie’ and describes herself as a ‘ lionesse’ having connotations of pride and strength. As well as describing herself using animal imagery, she also makes numerous animal comparisons with men. For example, she compares her husband to her sheep named ‘ Wilkin’; this comparison is arguably riddled with insults, not only is she comparing a man to an animal but the name’ Wilkin’ comprised of the words ‘ Wil’ (will) and the diminutive suffix ‘ kin’ has connotations of a lack of desire. Therefore, not only does the Wife mock men for comparing women with animals by flipping the imagery, she also mocks them with same degrading comparisons.

Underlying the Wife of Bath’s discussion and exploration of marriage appears constant imagery of trade and commerce. Her repeated references to medieval trade perhaps depict her as a more masculine figure. Marriages were often arranged (by males) for economic and political reasons and, on many occasions, this is how the Wife refers to her relationships. For example, she talks of courtship like bartering at market: ‘ Greet prees at market deere ware, and to greet cheep is holde at litel prys: this knoweth every woman that is wys.’ It is a possibility that Chaucer uses this imagery in order to comment on how reductionist and dehumanising the medieval marriage system was. This idea of trade appears again when the Wife turns the cliché of the ‘ flower of youth’ around to mean baking flour: ‘ the flour is goon, ther is namoore to telle; the bren, as i best kan, mow moste i selle.’ She equates herself to a miller who, after selling his good flour must now attempt to sell the bran. The image of fading beauty and youth still remains but with an undertone of business and commerce adding an extra dimension and commentary on the nature of marriage. Therefore, the repeated imagery of medieval trade reveals the protagonist’s practical attitude to relationships as well as aiding Chaucer’s social commentary.

In conclusion, throughout ‘ The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, Chaucer effectively uses imagery and symbolism in order to generate an understanding of the protagonist’s personality and ideas. References to Alison’s physical appearance alongside metaphors of fire and nature demonstrate the Wife’s passionate and lustful character whilst constant allusions to animals and trade help to powerfully express The Wife of Bath’s, and potentially the author’s, opinions and principles.