

# The wife unmasked

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The Wife Unmasked O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,  
An' foolish notion: What airs  
in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,  
An' ev'n devotion! Robert Burns

Scholarship identifies the personae of the Wife of Bath in The Canterbury tales with various distinctive interpretations including feminist, antifeminist, irreverent, arrogant, ridiculous, and sophisticated. Scholar Rosalyn Rossignol points out that "' the good Wife' has attracted a great deal of critical attention, partly because of the controversy that arises over interpreting her character" (298). The Wife is both emotional and cerebral, a comic figure and a real person. She has been seen as a feminist challenging patriarchy, but she has also been viewed as a satiric and complaisant anti-feminist. How is it possible that she can be seen in such contrasting perspectives? E. T.

Donaldson proposes a solution that Chaucer "discloses a world in which humanity is prevented by its own myopia, the myopia of the describer, from seeing what the dazzlingly attractive externals of life really represent" (935). However, if the Wife is everyman and everywoman, then all of these perspectives can be true. Rather than a singular, marginalized character with limiting aspects, the Wife is a complex and comprehensive blend of Chaucer's creations, and the center to which all of the other pilgrims and their tales return. Her portrait is more descriptive than any other character portrayed, but it also demonstrates the characteristics uniquely identified with each of the other characters. The prologue to her tale is the longest of any of the other characters. Is she just long-winded and full of prideful arrogance? I suggest that the limited details each of the other characters possess emanates from the comprehensive detail of the Wife's portrait and

prologue which completes a circular exposé. I propose that Chaucer's Wife is not just a Wife, or even a woman; she is an amalgamation of literary possibilities. Her literary knowledge is suspect, but her worldly experience spans a lifetime through which she acquires autonomy. In the introduction to *The Wordsworth Chaucer*, Editor Larry Benson discusses how Chaucer the poet draws on his own literary experience in creating his tales, and so too does Allisoun of Bath possess the experience that allows her to transcend the limits of definition (11). She is deaf in both ears and therefore cannot hear the hyperbole of dominant male discourse. She does not argue her right to speak, she just speaks. Contrary to acceptable femininity, she is a hypersexual woman, but sex is neither for enjoyment, nor procreation. Finally, Chaucer is not writing as a woman, or as a man attempting to write as a woman or using masculine writing to portray a female, he is writing in a manner that is useful to educate everyone to limitless possibilities. The Wife of Bath then, rather than a singly signified representation based on scholarship perspective, is, in reality, the nexus of the *Canterbury Tales*. Although like the Wife there are limitless possibilities for proving this argument, it is my plan to defend this thesis through the tropes of status, voice and experience as seen in her portrait, and the prologue to her tale. To prepare the way for the convergence of his themes, where everything and everyone emanate from and return to a central focus in the Wife of Bath, a General Prologue begins the tales with a representation of the biblical creation story in its hierarchical progression. In the opening lines, first there is water and wind, plants, followed by animals, and finally, portraits of the travelers are depicted. It is spring, a time of new beginnings, as well as a

time of pilgrimage to give thanks for past favors, and in Chaucer's fourteenth century world, twenty-nine diverse pilgrims "with ful devout courage" (22), gather at a public inn to sojourn to Canterbury, site of the holy shrine of the martyred Thomas Beckett. Born in Cheapside, London, Becket's inclusion in the tales illustrates human diversity, from vacuous impoverishment to reverential saintliness, themes also recurring throughout the tales and demonstrated by the Wife's portrait and prologue. Twenty-four pilgrims are presented in the portraits which begins with the highest rank, "a knyght ther was, and that a worthy man" (43), and ends with the lowliest, "a gentil Pardoner" (669). According to a popular website, Alisoun, a name which means "of nobility", and "sacred flame" (1), is also a common Middle English name. The name given by Chaucer to the Wife, it is apparent from the multiplicity of meanings that Alisoun represents both high and low culture, a correlation to the cross-cultural representations of her fellow travelers. Taken together, the pilgrims represent every facet of society, facets seen inclusively as the Wife's total composition. Each line of her portrait represents an attribute or characteristic illustrated in the portrait of one of the other pilgrims. While some of the travelers mimic one another in style or attribute, no other pilgrim possesses all of the qualities signified in each of the others. That Chaucer the poet repeated his themes over and over is not surprising, but that those themes all converge in the Wife of Bath is significant since it centers privilege in a woman. If the Wife is the Nexus, then Chaucer's allusion to the creation story points to her as the Eve from whom all women are descended. While Eve is not mentioned in the prologue to the Canterbury tales, she is a pivotal component of the creation story to

which Chaucer alludes. Chaucer would have wished to avoid accusations of heresy, a realistic concern in his time period. To have openly equated Eve with the Wife, with specificity of declaration, would have opened him up to, at the very least, severe criticism, which was not what he was interested in. He was interested in opening up the minds of the people by writing alternative realities. However, there are two prominent women in Chaucer's prologue, why wouldn't the Prioress be Eve? The Prioress is dainty, prepossessing and high in the social strata. Her portrait appears before the Wife's portrait in the general prologue. She has beautiful manners and is very sympathetic to even the smallest creature. Additionally, the Prioress is a nun, a woman who swears obedience to authority when she takes her vows. She is not a good prototype for Eve since the Prioress is certainly willing to acquiesce, whereas Eve and the Wife are not. The Wife is strong, bold, does not care what people think of her, she is her own person and like Eve, who was unwilling to accept the dictates of authority and wanted to control her own destiny, the Wife is also in search of control over her life. While Eve is not specifically referenced in Chaucer's creationism allusion, she is definitely alluded to by virtue of the hierarchical progression of pilgrims that Chaucer introduces to his readers. Adam and Eve occur in natural hierarchical progression in the creation story, from the lowest to the highest, water to man/woman, similar to the Chaucerian hierarchy in which the Wife is introduced to the reader. A compelling testament to the argument of the centrality of her character as binder for the tales is witnessed in the make-up of this very Chaucer class, where approximately sixty percent of the students have chosen to write their term paper on some characteristic aspect of the

Wife. No two representations are even similar, and analysis of her character ranges from psychological to pornographical arguments with everything in-between. The very diversity of these contemporary arguments do, however, represent the critical diversity argued over the past seven centuries but existing scholarship fails to recognize her important thematic centrality.