

# THE WIFE OF BATH


Sept. 20



## THE GENERAL PROLOGUE (445-76)


A good Wife was there of beside Bath,  
 But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe.  
 Of cloth-making she had such an haunt,  
 She passed them of Ypres and of Gaunt.  
 In all the parish wife ne was there none  
 That to the offring before her shoulde gone,  
 And if there did, certain so wroth was she  
 That she was out of all charity.  
 Her coverchiefs full fine were of ground —  
 I dorste swear they weyeden ten pound  
 That on a Sunday weren upon her head.  
 Her hosen weren of fine scarlet reed,  
 Full strait yteyd, and shoes full moist and newe.  
 Bold was her face and fair and red of hewe.  
 She was a worthy woman all her life:  
 Husbands at church door she hadde five,  
 Withouten other company in youthe—

But theerof needeth not to speak as nouthe.  
 And thrice had she been at Jerusalem;  
 She had passed many a strange stream;  
 At Rome she hadde been, and at Boulogne,  
 In Galice at Saint Jame, and at Coloigne:  
 She could muchel of wandering by the waye.  
 Gap-toothed was she, soothly for to saye.  
 Upon an ambler easily she sat,  
 Ywimpled well, and on her head an hat  
 As brood as is a buckler or a targe,  
 A foot-mantle° about her hippes large,  
 And on her feet a pair of spures sharpe.  
 In fellowship well could she laugh and carpe  
 Of remedies of love she knew parchaunce,  
 For she could° of that art the olde dance.



WHO IS  
THE WIFE  
OF BATH?

- A cloth maker/merchant
- A traveller
- Wealthy
- A widow (married five times)
- Named Alison
  
- One of the most popular Canterbury Pilgrims
- Also one of the most divisive



WHO IS  
THE WIFE  
OF BATH?

“The Wife of Bath is the first ordinary woman in English literature. By that I mean the first mercantile, working, sexually active woman—not a virginal princess or queen, not a nun, witch, or sorceress, not a damsel in distress nor a functional servant character, not an allegory”

- Marion Turner, *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*, pg. 2

### THE TWO CONFLICTING READINGS OF THE WIFE OF BATH:

The Wife of Bath is satirized; she is the butt of the joke; we are supposed to ridicule her and laugh *at* her

vs.

The Wife of Bath is a sympathetic character; she has valuable things to say; we are supposed to laugh *with* her and root for her

### THEMES IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

- Marriage
- Sex
- Money
- Women's place in life and literature

“Wives, yield to your husbands, as you do to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church.”

- Ephesians 5:22-23

“But it is no wonder if a fool acts insanely  
And is brought to grief through womanly wiles;  
For so was Adam beguiled by one, here on  
Earth”

- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Fitt 4, lines  
2414-16



Phyllis and Aristotle (12<sup>th</sup> C)

## WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

### WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

- Seductresses
- Deceptive/manipulative
- Physical/materialistic rather than spiritual/intellectual
- Naturally inferior to men

Unless

- She's a virgin (Mary), nun, or Saint
- The object of desire in a court romance

## WOMEN IN REALITY

Misogyny was certainly rampant in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, but at the same time women had a surprising amount of economic freedoms. Women could:

- Work as craftspeople
- Do business and earn/handle money
- Inherit money and property

**BUT**

- Legally, husbands were in charge of the household

## PILGRIMAGE AND MOBILITY

“And thrice had she been at Jerusalem;  
She had passed many a strange stream;  
At Rome she hadde been, and at Boulogne,  
In Galice at Saint Jame, and at Coloigne:  
She could muchel of wandering by the waye” (GP 463-7)

“I trowe thou woldest loke me in thy chest!” (WoBP 317)

“I swore that all my walking out by night  
Was for to espye wenches that he dight” (WoBP 397-8)

“Mine husbonde was at London all that Lent:  
I hadde the better leiser for to play,  
And for to see, and eek° for to be seye” (WoBP 550-52)



## A TONE SHIFT

I wolde no longer in the bed abide  
 If that I felt his arm over my side,  
 Til he hadde made his raunson unto me;  
 Thanne would I suffer him do his nicetee.  
 And therefore every man this tale I tell:  
 Winne whoso may, for all is for to sell;  
 With empty hand men may no hawkes lure.  
 For winning would I all his lust endure,  
 And make me a feigned appetite—  
 And yet in bacon had I never delight.  
 (409-418)

## THE OPENING OF THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

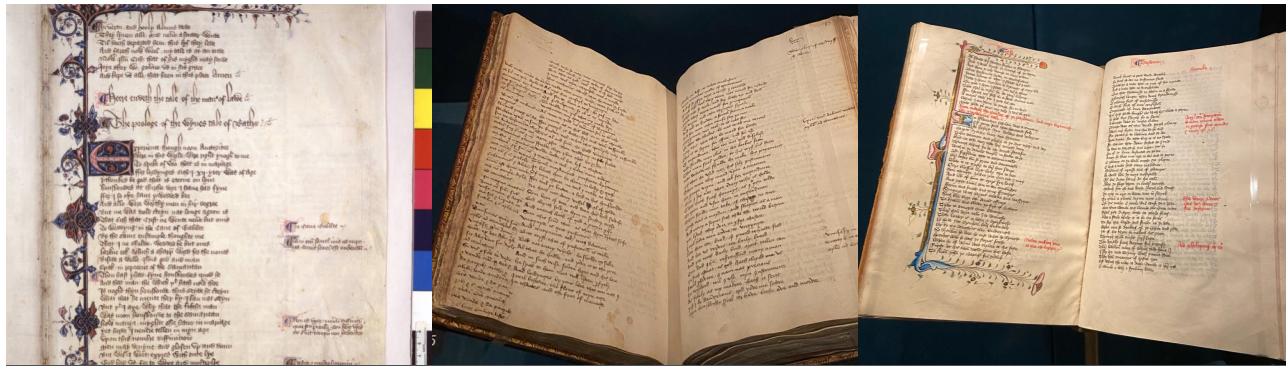
**Experience**, though **no authority**  
 Were in this world, is right enough for me  
 To speak of woe that is in mariage:  
 For lordinges, sith I twelve years was of age —  
 Thanked be God that is eterne on live —  
 Husbondes at chirche door I have had five  
 (1-6)

Authority	Experience
The writings of learned men, church officials, saints, classical philosophers, etc.	Her own experiences within her five marriages

## SPINNING

“Of cloth-making she had such an haunt,  
She passed them of Ypres and of Gaunt.” (GP 447-48)

“For all such wit is given us in oure birth:  
Deceite, weeping, spinning God hath give  
To women kindly while they may live.  
And thus of one thing I avaute me:  
At end I had the bet in each degree,  
By sleight or force, or by some manere thing,  
As by continuel murmur or grucching” (WBP 400-06)



GLOSED MANUSCRIPTS OF *THE WIFE OF BATH*

## GLOSSING

Men may divine and glosen up and doun,  
But well I woot, express, withouten lie,  
God bade for us to wax and multiply (26-28)

Glose whoso will, and saye both up and doun  
That they were maked for purgacioun  
Of urine, and oure bothe thinges smale  
Were eek to know a female from a male (119-22)

But in oure bed he was so fresh and gay,  
And therewithal so well could he me glose  
When that he would have my *bele chose*  
That, though he hadde me bet on every boon,  
He coude win again my love anon (508-12)

## THE BOOK OF WICKED WIVES

“But it is no wonder if a fool acts insanely  
And is brought to grief through womanly wiles;  
For so was Adam beguiled by one, here on Earth,  
Solomon by several women, and Samson was another --  
Delilah was cause of his fate – and afterwards David  
Was deluded by Bathsheba, and suffered much grief.  
Since these were ruined by their wiles, it would be a  
great gain  
To love women and not trust them, if a man knew how.”  
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Fitt 4, lines 2414-21

Of Phasipha that was the queen of Crete  
For shrewedness him thoughte the tale swete—  
Fy, speak no more, it is a grisly thing  
Of her horrible lust and her liking.  
Of Clytermistra for her lecherye  
That falsly made her husbände for to die,  
He read it with full good devocioun.  
- *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (733-39)



## WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour,  
 Of which that Britouns speken great honor,  
 All was this land fulfild of fairye:  
 The elf-queene with her jolly company  
 Daunced full ofte in many a greene mede —  
 This was the old opinion as I read;  
 ...  
 And so befell it that this King Arthour  
 Had in his house a lusty bachelor,  
 That on a day cam riding from river,  
 And happed that, alone as he was born,  
 He saw a maide walking him biforn (857-86)

## THE ENDING

“Choose now,” quod she, “one of these  
 thinges tweye:  
 To han° me foul and old till that I deye  
 And be to you a trewe humble wife,  
 And never you displeas in all my life;  
 Or elles° ye will han me young and fair,  
 And take your aventure° of the repair°  
 That shall be to your house because of  
 me—  
 Or in some other place, well may be.  
 Now choose youreselven whether that  
 you liketh.

This knight aviseth him° and sore siketh°  
 But atte last he said in this manere:  
 “My lady and my love, and wife so dere,  
 put me in your wise governaunce:  
 Cheseth° youreself which may be most  
 plesaunce°  
 And most honour to you and me also.  
 I do no fors the whether° of the two,  
 For as you liketh° it suffiseth° me.”  
 (1219-35)