



Marriage in "The Wife of Bath"

Chaucer's View . . .

or

Alisoun's View?

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Courtly Love

The Importance of Company

The Corruption of the Church

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Romance

Fabliaux

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Springtime--symbolizes rebirth and fresh beginnings, and is thus appropriate for the beginning of Chaucer's text. Springtime also evokes erotic love.

Clothing--the description of garments helps to define each character.

Physiognomy--was a science that judged a person's temperament and character based on his or her anatomy.

General Prologue Description: The Wife of Bath

There was a housewife come from Bath, or near,
Who- sad to say- was deaf in either ear.

At making cloth she had so great a bent
She bettered those of Ypres and even of Ghent.

In all the parish there was no goodwife
Should offering make before her, on my life;

And if one did, indeed, so wroth was she
It put her out of all her charity.

Her kerchiefs were of finest weave and ground;
I dare swear that they weighed a full ten pound

Which, of a Sunday, she wore on her head.

Her hose were of the choicest scarlet red,
Close gartered, and her shoes were soft and new.

Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.

She'd been respectable throughout her life,
With five churched husbands bringing joy and strife,

Not counting other company in youth;

But thereof there's no need to speak, in truth.

Three times she'd journeyed to Jerusalem;

And many a foreign stream she'd had to stem;

At Rome she'd been, and she'd been in Boulogne,
In Spain at Santiago, and at Cologne.

She could tell much of wandering by the way:

Gap-toothed was she, it is no lie to say.

Upon an ambler easily she sat,

Well wimpled, aye, and over all a hat

As broad as is a buckler or a targe;

A rug was tucked around her buttocks large,

And on her feet a pair of sharpened spurs.

In company well could she laugh her slurs.

The remedies of love she knew, perchance,

For of that art she'd learned the old, old dance.



Do we trust the narrator at this point?

What of his tendency to exaggerate?

What of his respect for the Wife's being married five times?



Is this intentional, tongue-in-cheek irony by the narrator?

Or does Chaucer seem to have his narrator reveal more than he means to--

A kind of DUFUS.

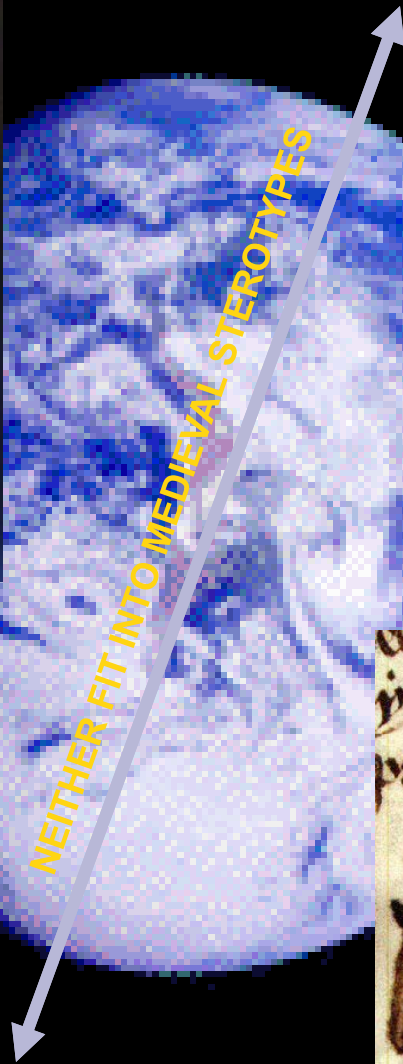
Consider: Polar Opposites

The Prioress (Nun)

- Embodies femininity, purity, faithfulness
- Embodies strict sensibility
- Simple and coy and she never curses



NEITHER FIT INTO MEDIEVAL STEREOTYPES



The Wife of Bath

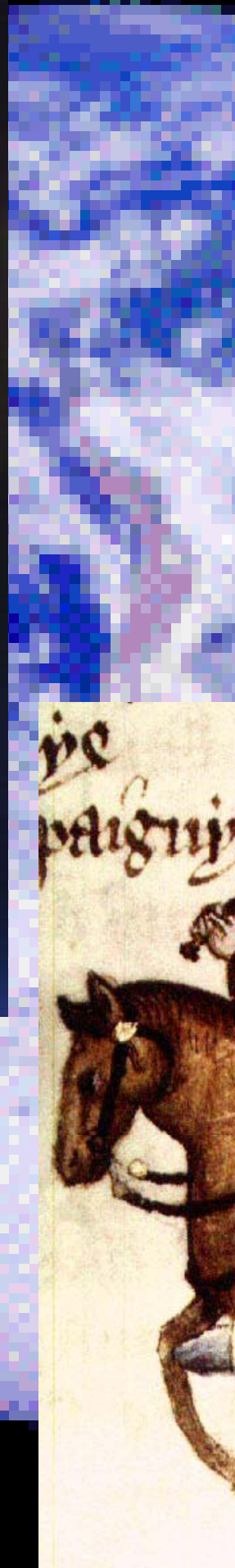
- Embodies sensuality, willfulness
- Embodies elemental vitality
- Outspoken, aggressive demonstration of her instincts, appetites and will power

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**LOVE & MARRIAGE ARE RECURRING THEMES IN
*THE CANTERBURY TALES***

**Several other Pilgrims give their views of marriage,
but only Alisoun, the Wife of Bath,
gives such detailed opinions,
based on extensive personal experience:**



She's been married

5 times

and is looking for

#6.

What, then, *are* the views of the Wife of Bath?

#1

- She argues from scripture and experience that marriage, despite its tribulations, is not a bad thing.

#2

- Successive marriages for those who are widowed are perfectly in order.

#3

- She shows how St. Paul, in 1st Corinthians, claims only to *advise* his readers and expressly states that his advice is not a binding commandment:



Forsooth, I'll not keep chaste for good and all;
When my good husband from the world is gone,
Some Christian man shall marry me anon;
For then, the apostle says that I am free
To wed, in God's name, where it pleases me.
He says that to be wedded is no sin;
Better to marry than to burn within. (ll. 46-52)

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion . . . I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are [as virgins]. I Cor. 7:25

#4

- Marriage may be inferior to chastity, but those who urge virginity on women do not demand perfection in other matters, such as giving away all one's wealth (which Christ commanded the rich young ruler).

She may be suggesting that those who become priests and remain (or profess to be) chaste shouldn't disapprove of her sexuality, when they are guilty of pursuing wealth.



#5

- Though marriage may be less than perfect, she says it is an honorable estate.

Though not as pure and expensive as golden vessels that represent chastity, she says that household vessels of wood can be clean & useful.

- **Sex is an important feature of married life,**

Tell me also, to what purpose or end
The genitals were made, that I defend,
And for what benefit was man first wrought?
Trust you right well, they were not made for naught.
Explain who will and argue up and down
That they were made for passing out, as known,
Of urine, and our two belongings small
Were just to tell a female from a male,
And for no other cause- ah, say you no?
Experience knows well it is not so;

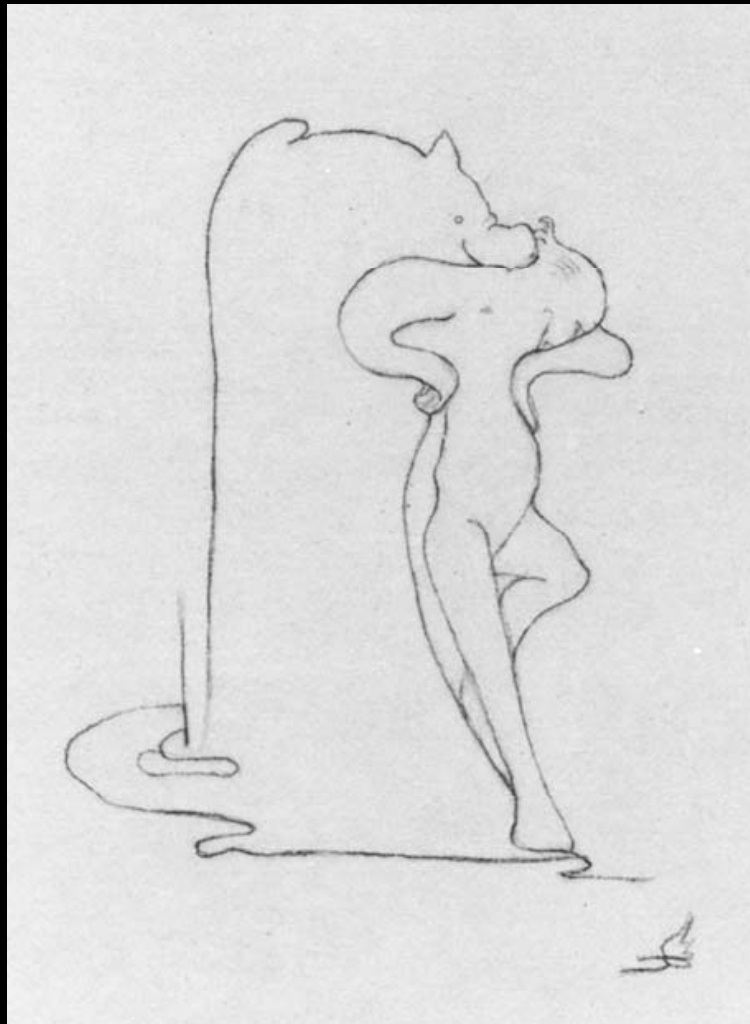
In the Wife's opinion. she claims that she would use her *instrument* as freely as her maker had it sent to her, that her husband would have her both day and night.

- **She claims that, according to her husbands, she is the best that can be and admits that she can't "withdraw her chamber of Venus from a good fellow."**
- **She relishes such boasts, and takes great delight in recounting her demands of her first three husbands. She tells us that she forced them as often as possible to do their marital duty, which seemed to be inversely proportional to their capacity to do it.**



#8

- **She does not see marriage as an equal and loving partnership, and she can certainly not bear to be dominated by her husband(s).**



- **She has worn them out sexually or badgered them to death. She has purposely made them jealous and has taken lovers in retaliation for their taking lovers.**

#9

- Her desire is for complete dominance - sovereignty or “mastery” - in the relationship.
- In her Tale, the question is asked, "What do women most desire?" It is a question whose answer she is sure of.
- The Wife shows, by the examples of her marriages, that this sovereignty of wives over husbands is not only desired by wives, but desirable for husbands. She tells how, having worn down her 5th combative husband until he agreed they would be equal in the marriage, she then treated him well, and was "as kind / As any wife from Denmark unto India." Thereafter, their marriage was blissful and exemplary.

Is she admirable?

Ridiculous?

Attractive?

Repulsive?



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