



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//English Literature

The Study of Poetry Pre 1900

Unit A2 2

Chaucer: The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

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Starting Point

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.

This Assessment Objective (AO) involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poem or poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Poetic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyze the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. **This AO is the driver of Unit A2 2: Section A and is of primary importance.**

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic methods such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

1. The poetic method should be:

identified, using appropriate terminology if possible;

illustrated, quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student's own words;

analysed so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect; and

related to the key term of the question.

2. Use of the terms “image” and “imagery”

For our purposes in this section “images” and “imagery” are to be sought and found in the language of the poems, and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as “In this poem the reader has the image of nature as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this section, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech,



where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet’s words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. This feature, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

identified - here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);

illustrated - a full and apt quotation should be selected;

analysed – so as to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved (e.g. through a consideration of the syntactical features of the quotation offered); and

related to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterisation or development) should be understood by students.

A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the poem(s).

No specific sources are prescribed or recommended. Nevertheless, the questions address a contextual issue – social, cultural, historical, biographical, or literary – and candidates will be expected to provide appropriate information from outside the text. Contextual information of the stipulated type which is made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Demonstrate knowledge of the context which shaped the poems** – this could include social, cultural, historical, biographical and/or literary detail.
- **Comment on the significance of chosen contextual information** – link your selected contextual details to their impact on the poems’ intention and/or creation.
- **Use only relevant contextual information appropriately applied** – as stated before, it is important to focus on what is actually asked and shape your information accordingly.

Be aware that while context is important in consolidating our understanding of the poetry, you should not overuse contextual information, especially at the expense of textual analysis. A few contextual details, succinctly expressed and strictly related to the question, are far superior to entire paragraphs on the world outside of the poem(s).



A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between and within poems discussing features such as similarities, contrasts, continuity and development in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in context. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that the text is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a writer's preoccupation may not receive explicit statement in a poem.



A01: Textual knowledge and understanding

As you read this guide, you will begin to develop knowledge and understanding of meaning and form your own interpretations of the poem. This guide will suggest areas for discussion and further research. You will need to adapt knowledge and understanding in order to frame an examination response that is relevant to the key terms of the question. You will need to support your ideas with relevant reference to the text, and present logical interpretations. You will need to use accurate and clear language and appropriate literary terms.

Plot Summary

The Prologue

Lines 1-187

The Prologue opens with the Wife explaining that her experience in marriage has given her the authority to speak about it knowledgeably. She tells the pilgrims that she has had five husbands since the age of twelve and would welcome a sixth. She justifies her multiple marriages using Biblical references, and arguing that it is God's command to multiply. She challenges the counter-argument put forward on Biblical authority, stating it is not a sin to marry and men may wed several times without reproach. She discusses the concept of virginity, and acknowledges that while it may be noble, procreation is important too and she intends to use her God-given gifts. The Pardoner, alarmed at her comments (see the characterisation of the Pardoner as "*a gelding or a mare*" in the *General Prologue*) responds by saying that he had planned to wed but now fears that his future wife will use her body to control him. The Wife replies that she has a warning for him and he should learn from the example of others.

Lines 188-452

The Prologue takes the form of an autobiographical confession where the Wife narrates her own life story, revealing how her first three husbands were rich, old and "*good*", compliant to her wishes, while she treated them badly. She admits that she used them for financial gain and for her own pleasure. She gives examples of feminine tricks she used to gain advantage: accusing one of them wrongly of having an affair, getting the maid to act as a "*witnesse*" to his crimes, scolding him to make him feel guilty about something he hadn't done or reproaching him for being drunk. After a long digression where she rails against men's misuse of women, she admits that she only gave her husbands physical satisfaction when they gave her money and, in making them feel guilty, she was able to get what she wanted.

Lines 453-503

The fourth husband was a reveller who had a mistress. She digresses, reflecting how she was youthful and gay and could dance and sing sweetly after having wine but now she has lost her beauty with age. She was angry and jealous and so tortured him with anger and jealousy too, driving him to the grave. Ever shrewd, she didn't waste money on an expensive funeral.

**Lines 504-586**

The fifth husband she married for love. She recalls how he was a physically abusive scoundrel to whom she was sexually attracted; women after all, she tells us, desire only what they cannot have. Jankin was previously a student and after leaving Oxford, the twenty-year-old boarded with the Wife's friend Alice. The Wife went to visit her close friend in the spring in order to be seen by "*lusty folk*" while her fourth husband was in London. She flirted with Jankin, walking with him in the fields and suggested to him that they should marry if she was a widow. She lied, telling him that she had fallen in love with him and dreamed of him.

Lines 587-828

On the death of her fourth husband she feigned grief, but secretly lusted after Jankin as he carried the coffin at the funeral. She confesses that although she was forty years of age, she was still desirable and was unable to resist him because of her lustfulness and voracious appetite for sex. When the two wed, she gave him her land and wealth. However Jankin was abusive and the Wife was unable to use her own tricks to get her way. Her new husband threatened to abandon her and lectured her on history, justifying his treatment of her from the Bible. He referred daily to his "*Book of Wicked Wives*", highlighting the evils of women like Eve and Delilah, listing their sins of malignancy, lechery, mariticide and accusing them of bringing about the Fall of Mankind. When the Wife tore pages from his book, he struck her, leaving her deaf in one ear. The Wife, lying on the floor, claimed that she wanted one last kiss before she died. When her husband knelt over her asking for forgiveness, she hit him on the cheek claiming that she was avenged. The two then settled on a truce: the book is burnt, the Wife gains control of the house and land and her husband agrees to let her do as she pleases as long as she is loving, kind and doesn't dishonour him. With the Wife's history finished she says she will now narrate her story.

Lines 829-856

A dispute amongst the company begins. The Friar laughs at the Wife and says he is glad that the long-winded speech of the Wife is over. The Summoner responds by rebuking the Friar for intruding on the tale and tells him to be quiet or go sit down as he is spoiling the fun. The pair threaten to tell mocking tales about each other's professions until the Host interrupts the argument calling for peace and the opportunity for the woman to tell her tale. The Wife says that with the Friar's permission she will now tell her tale and the Friar agrees to listen.

The Tale**Lines 857-881**

The Tale begins hundreds of years ago in the old days of King Arthur when the land was filled with all kinds of supernatural creatures such as elves and fairies. The Wife makes a shrewd criticism of the Friar (getting her own back for his having interrupted her) saying these beings are gone because beggars and friars have taken their place. Women may walk safely because there are no evil spirits ("*incubi*") now, and a woman's only danger of being dishonoured comes from the friars.

Lines 882-918

In the court of King Arthur there was a knight, a "*lusty bachelor*" who saw a young beautiful maiden, and assaulted and raped her. By law he should have been beheaded as punishment for his crime but the Queen and other ladies pleaded for his life. The King allowed the Queen to decide his punishment. She set him a quest to find out what women



most desire, giving him a year and a day to find the answer. The Knight agreed and pledged to return.

Lines 919-982

The time passed quickly and although the Knight looked hard for the answer he was unsuccessful, as no one that he asked agreed on the answer. Some suggested that women desired riches while others suggested honour, gaiety, the fulfilment of physical desire, fine clothing, to be widowed or married, to be free. Some reasoned that women's greatest desire was to have a good reputation - to be considered wise and clean of sin, or steadfast, or discreet. The Wife's own opinion is that those who said that what women wanted most was flattery and attention were nearest the truth. At this point the Wife deviates from her tale to tell Ovid's story of Midas, who trusted his wife with his secret that he had two long ass-like ears underneath his hair. She says that the wife burned with the secret, and having sworn not to reveal it to anyone, put her mouth down to the water of a pool to whisper it, thus easing herself of the burden of having to keep a secret. The Wife muses that while women want to be seen as trustworthy they cannot keep any secrets – and that you can find the rest of the tale by reading Ovid.

Lines 983-1022

Still failing to find the answer, the Knight journeyed home sorrowfully. At the edge of a forest he saw a large group of ladies dancing but as he neared them they vanished. An ugly old woman sat on the grass and asked him what he sought. The Knight related his quest and the hag offered to tell him the secret if he agreed to do something for her when she asks it. The Knight agrees and the crone assures him that no one will dare dispute this answer and whispers it in his ear.

Lines 1023-1072

The Knight and the hag returned to the court where the Queen and many ladies are in attendance, awaiting his answer. The Knight revealed that what women most desire is to have sovereignty over their husbands. No lady in the court denies this and they agree that his life should be spared. The "*olde wyf*" then leapt up and demanded that, as she had provided the correct answer, the Knight's promise to her must be kept: the Knight owes his life to her and she wants to be his wife. The Knight is dismayed and offers all his worldly goods, but the old hag refuses and insists that she should be wedded to him. The Knight sees it as a damnation and a degradation to his family, but he was bound by his oath and agreed to wed the woman.

Lines 1073-1105

The Knight and woman wed in private. There was no joy or great wedding-feast, only sorrow and shame as the Knight was embarrassed by his wife's ugliness. He hid himself away and on the wedding night was reluctant to consummate the marriage. The hag questions his behaviour, wondering how she has offended him and the Knight responds that he is repulsed by her lowly birth and loathsome appearance.

Lines 1106-1116

The woman reminds him of the true nature of nobility and gentility ("*gentillesse*"). True nobility, she argues, is not derived from riches or high birth or social rank. True nobility is based on noble deeds, and on a Christ-like virtuousness. If people are of natural nobility they will always be honourable whether in public or private.

Lines 1117-1218

Christ, she claims, wants us to receive our nobility from Him, not from our ancient family



or lineage. They can bequeath to us high rank in society, but they cannot pass down to us good character or virtue.

The poet Dante speaks eloquently of this, she tells her husband in what becomes a lecture, and emphasises that true nobility comes from God. Everyone knows, she says, that if nobility were an innate quality it would never die out, but pass on endlessly from generation to generation. Take fire, for example – fire can only burn; that is its quality. But that is not true of people – they do not invariably obey the laws that should govern their behaviour. And so you find the descendant of a noble house living an ignoble life.

Your idea of nobility (she tells her husband) is nothing but family pride, and nothing like the nobility which is derived from God. She cites classical authors to back up her argument that true nobility is defined by living a virtuous life. In this way she rebukes her husband, who had accused her of being low-born.

Next, she disposes of his second criticism of her – that she is poor. Christ chose poverty. It too is praised by classical authorities. Poverty may be a harsh blessing, but it inspires us to be intelligent and industrious. Poverty can lead to self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and knowledge of God. So, she says to the Knight, do not reproach me with my poverty.

Finally, she moves on to his third criticism of her – that she is old and ugly. Age deserves respect. If, as he says, she is old and ugly, then he need have no fear of being cuckolded. However, since she knows what he likes, she will satisfy him.

Lines 1219-1264

The woman then offers the Knight a choice: either to have her young and beautiful but unfaithful, or old and ugly but virtuous. The Knight, humbled, responds that she is wise and should choose herself the best way to honour both of them – whatever pleases her will please him. At this reply the woman claims that since her husband has given her mastery (“*maistrie*”) over him, she will be both beautiful and good and asks him to look on her true beauty and youth. The Knight seeing her as her true self is overjoyed and kisses her passionately. The couple lived happily in perfect joy and the woman obeyed her husband doing everything to please him. The Wife finishes her tale by asking Christ to send women husbands who are meek, young and vigorous in bed, and to shorten the lives of those husbands who are old, angry or miserly – or who will not be governed by their wives.

Characters

The Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath is a vivacious character, and is perhaps one of the most fully depicted characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. While other characters tend to be presented sometimes as representatives of a type, such as the Knight who represents male chivalry, the Wife herself is a more realistic and flawed character. Chaucer’s portrayal of the character is conveyed through her own narrative in her Prologue, but also through the narrator’s comments in lines 447-478 of the *General Prologue* (see <http://www.librarius.com/canttran/genpro447-478.htm>).

Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, was first married at the age of twelve and has had five husbands



from whom she has gained her wealth, although she had *“oother compaignye in youthe”* suggesting sexual relationships with men outside marriage. She is a talented cloth maker, surpassing the skill of famed weavers in Ypres and Ghent and for a woman of the medieval period is surprisingly well travelled, having been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Boulogne, Spain and Cologne. However, her journeys are not a result of her devout religious beliefs but reflect her sociable nature and desire to find another husband. She is an outgoing character, which is evident in her ability to *“laughe and carpe”* in company.

In terms of appearance, Chaucer’s descriptions of her clothing and physical looks suggest a woman who is very sexually aware. Her facial features are not described in attractive terms – *“Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe”* - but her apparel indicates the trappings of wealth and sexual display with her tightly-laced scarlet stockings, shiny new shoes, sharp spurs and fine head garments – details which indicate an extravagant and flamboyant character who demands attention from others. The colour red associated with the Wife of Bath is symbolic of her sexuality and sense of her own importance and dominance over others. The Wife, once a beauty, laments how she has lost her youthful vigour with age, *“But age, allas, that al wole envenyme, / Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith”*, wistfully acknowledging how she has declined in her attractiveness. The Wife is now over forty and is gap-toothed with wide hips. She claims that the gap-teeth suit her well, and this was a feature that in medieval folklore was associated with lustfulness. This is emphasised by the fact that the narrator refers to her *“wandringe by the weye”*, a metaphor implying her weakness for sexual affairs.

In terms of character, the Wife of Bath is brazen, pushy and self-confident as is evident from her first lines where she claims authority through her vast experience in marriage. She frankly admits that she married her husbands for their wealth, and in her marriages refuses to conform to the expected roles of a wife. Admitting to how she ill-treated them, she refuses to work or please them in bed. She also reveals some of the tricks she uses to gain mastery (this will be a key idea) over her husbands. On the surface her three husbands seem to have treated her well, giving her land and money and eager to bring her things from the fair. However she abuses this kindness and realises that she does not need to work to obtain their love as she *“hadde hem hoolly in myn hond”*, and did not need to please them unless it was for her profit. Her confession that she used her husbands for gain suggests a materialistic, grasping character that uses men and marriage for self-advancement. While her mistreatment of her husbands is immoral, modern readers might admire her enduring spirit in the way she refuses to accept male authority, rejects passive female stereotypes and insists on her own independence and the obedience of men. Her actions and attitude show that she challenges the culturally held belief that women should be timid and submissive.

Also shocking is the Wife’s liberal attitude towards sexuality and women’s sexual freedom. Controversially she discloses how she is capable of using her body to gain mastery over men, and argues that since God has given her genitals she intends to use them, thus challenging the Church’s teachings about women and sexual ethics. Her outspoken comments and bawdy language might characterise her as a shrewish harpy with loose morals; however her rhetorically brilliant though at times specious arguments highlight the double standards directed towards women in medieval times. In her introduction to the Tale, the Wife argues for her right to remarry after being widowed, challenging the Church’s belief that chastity is more desirable than a second marriage, and cites examples of men such as Abraham and Jacob who had several wives. The Wife shows her ability to use and manipulate Scripture to fit her arguments. The Wife is deaf in one ear, suggesting that she is oblivious to moral teachings – or perhaps, hears what she chooses to hear.



There are many contradictions in the character of the Wife. We might see her as a proto-feminist figure in the way that she refuses to be dominated by her husbands and the other male pilgrims; she undoubtedly supports the rights of women and even advocates female sovereignty, and is an indomitable spirit who asserts her independence and mastery over men. She ridicules religious teaching concerning the remarriage of widows, showing that she challenges anti-feminist traditions. However, she also epitomises much of the anti-feminist attitudes of the medieval period rather than contesting them: she embodies many of the vices ascribed to women. For example, she is portrayed as a gossiping, nagging wife, and much attention is given to her sinfully sexual nature and the way she has sex for both pleasure and material advantage. She also repeats accepted attitudes, for example that men are more reasonable or think more rationally than women. She herself presents women as untrustworthy with secrets and hypocritical in that they want to do as they please but also want to be seen as virtuous. A medieval readership would be perhaps likely to view the Wife as an outrageous character whose comments and attitudes were meant to be laughed at rather than taken seriously.

There is a degree of development in the Wife's character as the conclusion of the Prologue suggests. The Wife confesses to the mistreatment of her husbands and boasts about the way she was able to manipulate and master them with complete disregard for her marriage vows. Jankin has a similar attitude to marriage and there is the suggestion that, as the Wife had done previously, he has married an older partner for self-advancement. This leads to a clash of wills between the two characters each of whom seeks to master the other, which culminates in a physical fight and is resolved with an agreement that the Wife will have control over the household but agrees that she will guard her honour and his reputation. The agreement allows for a peaceful accord between the couple (*"After that day we hadden never debaat"*) and the Wife seems to have changed her ways (*"I was to hym as kynde/As any wyf... And also trewe, and so was he to me"*) suggesting that she has learnt to compromise, allowing for a more equal and respectful union.

As a last point, it is important to note the numerous inaccuracies in the Wife's arguments: for example she refers to the story of Midas to support her point that women cannot be trusted with secrets, but in Ovid's version it is a male, the king's barber, who betrays the secret. Is Chaucer's presentation of the Wife meant to be viewed as ironic? Is Chaucer adapting his Ovidian source material to accord with the character of the Wife?

Jankin

Jankin is the Wife's fifth husband and one of the few characters to be named in the whole of the Wife's Tale and Prologue. Where the Wife's first three husbands were rich, elderly and unable to master the Wife, Jankin is in contrast a young scholar with no land or riches. She meets him through her friend while her present husband is in London and becomes infatuated with him because of his youth and good looks. She describes how at the funeral of her fourth husband she was attracted to him noticing he *"hadde a paire/Of legges and of feet so clene and faire"*.

It is the Wife's decision to marry for love that gives her fifth husband power over her. Jankin exploits his position, using his power to try to dominate her and assert his will. The Wife's description of their married life depicts it as a power struggle where she refuses to be dominated by him. Jankin *"nolde suffre nothyng of my list"* refusing to allow the Wife any of her desires, but she also *"nolde noght forbere hym in no cas."* Jankin will not be dominated by his wife and her attempts to use her usual tricks to dominate him are ineffectual.



Jankin is representative of misogynistic attitudes towards women, as is evident in the way he cites a wide range of religious and classical literature to support his arguments about the depravity of women and their sinful and immoral nature. Jankin's *"Book of Wicked Wives"* illustrates medieval attitudes towards women: the book is a collection of stories about deceitful wives such as Eve who brought about the downfall of mankind by tempting Adam with the forbidden fruit. Jankin sums up male attitudes towards women in his comments that women are wicked and contrary, and cast off their shame as easily as their undergarments.

The attitudes expressed in his book and perpetuated by Jankin lead to a violent confrontation between Jankin and the Wife. In her anger at Jankin's lecturing her about female behaviour, she tears out three pages of the book. Jankin responds with a blow to the head that leaves her unconscious on the floor and her hearing in one ear permanently damaged. The Wife takes advantage and argues that Jankin has tried to kill her. Remorseful, he asks for her forgiveness and while he is off guard she gets her own blow in. At last, however, the two reach a mutual agreement where the Wife retains control over the household and land but must remain faithful and kind.

Is Jankin now dead? Some critics believe so given that the Wife claims she is looking for her sixth husband. She often speaks of him in the past tense and asks God to *"blesse his soule"*. However others point to the beginning of her Prologue where she states that she has had five husbands and would welcome the sixth because she *"wol nat kepe me chaast in al/Whan my housbonde is fro the world ygon"*, thus suggesting that Jankin is alive and she is anticipating his departure.

The Knight

The Knight, like most characters in the actual Tale does not have a name and is representative of a type – a typical feature of fairy-tale and medieval romance genres where the character's function in the plot rather than personality is of significance. In the Tale the Knight symbolises patriarchal power over women. At the beginning of the tale Chaucer (via the Wife) describes him as a *"lusty bacheler"* who on spying a young maiden, rapes her, *"By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed"*. His behaviour towards the young woman shows that he is dishonourable and abuses his position to satisfy his lust, rather than acting honourably and with chivalry as would be expected of a knight.

Throughout the Tale the Knight acts dishonourably: he is unwilling to fulfil his promise to the old woman and only does so because the hag insists that he honours their agreement in public before the court. Also he is superficial in the way that he rejects the ugly woman because of her poverty and appearance, deriding her for her lowborn status and her *"loothly, and so oold"* looks.

At the conclusion of the Tale the Knight appears to have undergone a transformation, but it is questionable as to how deep or lasting this change is. When given a choice by his wife he concedes it back to her, stating *"I put me in youre wise governance"* and thus handing complete control over to her. The Knight appears to have learnt the lesson that what women desire is mastery over their husbands, and he is therefore rewarded with a wife who changes into a beautiful young woman and vows to obey him in all *"That myghte doon hym plesance or liking"*. The Knight's joy may suggest that he remains superficial and ultimately unrepentant and unchanged, having learnt simply to give women the answer they want.



The Loathly Lady

The Loathly Lady is a supernatural creature who has the power to transform herself from an old hag to a beautiful maiden at will and save the life of the Knight. The Knight first encounters her on his homeward journey, when he observes twenty-four maidens dancing at the side of a forest. On his approach, they disappear and are replaced by an old woman sitting on the green, a fact that indicates the old woman's supernatural status. The "Loathly Lady" is a character type that occurs often in medieval folklore, and she has the ability to save the Knight from certain death by furnishing him with the correct answer, indicating her power over men's fate.

In the Tale the Loathly Lady represents the dominant woman and at times can be likened to the Wife of Bath herself. Like the Wife, the hag is old and expresses her disapproval of men. She is skilful in her handling of the Knight in the way she pressurises him to fulfil his promise by strategically revealing the agreement to the court. She criticises her husband's treatment of her on their wedding night, lectures him extensively on his superficiality and delivers a long sermon on "*gentillesse*" and the true nature of nobility. The old woman displays the same rhetorical skill as the Wife, and presents a strong argument for the advantages of poverty and old age.

Readers may interpret the old hag as a projection of the desires of the Wife herself and her belief that happiness in marriage can be found only if the wife is given sovereignty. However this reading is problematic as the conclusion of the Tale depicts a wife obedient to her husband in everything: the old hag transforms into a male fantasy of beauty and submissiveness.

Themes

Themes within The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale include:

Mastery and power within relationships

Mastery is a central theme that not only connects the Wife's Prologue and Tale, but also is an important issue raised in several of the other Canterbury Tales.

The Wife starts her Prologue by introducing the theme of marriage but her real concern is mastery, as is evident in the numerous references to "*maistrie*", authority, governance and sovereignty which permeate her narrative. In both the Prologue and the Tale, the Wife challenges the accepted tradition of male authority and male abuse of power, arguing that the only possibility for true peace within marriage is through male concession, giving sovereignty to the wife. This radical attitude subverts the patriarchal order. In Genesis 3:16 God declares to Eve "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." Eve is representative of womankind, and theology argues for female submission to the superiority of the husband. The Wife with her belief that women should be the dominant partner challenges this view.

The struggle for mastery in male/female relationships is evident in the Wife's account of her experiences in her first three marriages, which she describes as a war over who should be "*maister of my body and of my good*" i.e. her property. The Wife relates how she gained control over the household money and property. In the sections where she directly addresses her husband(s), she contests the control of the strongbox, and her use



of language (they were “*bounden unto*” her and they “*yeven hir lond and hir tresoor*”) shows her mastery over them. The use of direct address here gives the impression that these arguments are happening at that moment. Her dominance over her husbands is also physical – she refuses to satisfy their sexual desires and admits that she would “*al his lust endure*” and feign sexual interest for profit. In her use of bird imagery (“*with empty hand men may none haukes lure*”) she casts herself as a falconer, again suggestive of her dominance. She disputes her husband’s attempt to control her appearance on the grounds that attractive dress will lead to infidelity. She responds that “*he shal nat kepe me*”, but that she will do as she pleases. She asserts her control over her own body, and that she has the ability to choose with whom she sleeps.

Ultimately the Wife’s argument points to her beliefs that women will not love a man who does not allow them autonomy within the relationship, and that a woman should be given full sovereignty. However what many critics point out is that the Wife seeks dominance not equality. She describes herself as a “*whippe*”, and the pair of sharp spurs she wears is also suggestive of her control over others. She says that she will speak of suffering in marriage, but her narrative indicates that she is responsible for making her husbands suffer. While she attests that female governance is necessary for peace and a harmonious relationship, her descriptions of her relationships when she has the mastery do not suggest a pleasant marital union. She describes the misery she inflicts on her husbands and goes into detail about the numerous tricks she uses to obtain control – deceiving, weeping, accusing her husbands of wrongdoing even though she acknowledges they were guiltless, employing others to corroborate her lies, and laughing with “*myrthe*” at her husbands’ stupidity in believing her deceptions.

The Wife’s mastery over male misogyny is perhaps her greatest triumph and leads to a peaceful resolution to the gender conflict. Her battle with her fifth husband results from the fact that he abuses his position, using his wife’s adoration to his advantage, and she describes how his mistreatment of her was part of the attraction. She regrets the fact that she has given him mastery over her by giving him all her land and property. Jankin also uses his scholarly knowledge to control his wife’s behaviour and lecture her on morality, a debate that comes to a physical struggle in the comic scene where the Wife rips out pages of his book and Jankin lashes out leaving the Wife unconscious. She cleverly manipulates the situation, asking him if he has killed her in order to get her property and beseeches him for one final kiss. She avenges herself, hitting him on the cheek when he attempts to fulfil her dying request. The skirmish leads to peaceful agreement between the sexes where the woman is given governance over the property and land, and also over her husband’s hand (physical violence) and tongue (misogynistic arguments) with the book destroyed immediately. While the Wife agrees to maintain his honour and reputation, it is clear that she is the winner as she holds “*the bridel in myn hond*”, the animal imagery showing that she has gained mastery.

The Wife’s Tale also supports her argument that women should retain full sovereignty in a relationship. The Knight, a symbol of male dominance, abuses his noble position to gain mastery over the young maiden, an act which is condemned by King Arthur and as punishment the Knight must submit to the will of the Queen and the other ladies of the court; control over the Knight is further established by the Queen when she insists that he should pledge to return to the court a year and a day later. The Loathly Lady similarly establishes control over the Knight by eliciting an oath from him which submits him to her will. In response to the Loathly Lady’s request that the Knight marries her, the horrified Knight beseeches her to “*Taak al my good and lat my body go*”, showing that he would rather grant the old hag governance of his property than his body. The conclusion of the Tale, where the old woman transforms into a beautiful maiden because the Knight



concedes mastery to her, and then agrees to be faithful and obedient to her husband perhaps suggests that true happiness and tranquillity can only be found when one party relinquishes power and control over the other.

Attitudes to women and femininity

Linked to the theme of mastery and symbolised in the Knight's quest to understand women, is the issue of women and female identity. The Wife's concern with the male definition of women occupies a significant portion of her Prologue and her arguments about marriage. In her narrative she questions notions of womanhood, railing against anti-feminist attitudes in her account of her marriages. Chaucer adapts ideas taken from several sources such as *Liber aureolus de nuptiis* (Golden Book of Marriage) by Theophrastus and Jerome's *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, texts which are representative of the typical views of women prevalent in Chaucer's day. This text examines these stereotypes and challenges the view of women they present. Indeed, as she says, if women had written stories "*they wold han written of men moore wikkednesse/Than al the mark of Adam may redresse*" indicating that the perceived negative view of women is presented by males, and that women have no opportunity to reply.

The Wife takes issue with the hypocrisy of male attitudes towards women. She complains about the male criticisms that leave women with no alternatives: she points out that men value women for their beauty but believe an attractive woman is like a "*castel wal*" in that she is easily assailable and cannot remain chaste. However, men think an ugly woman will leap on every man she sees; she highlights the way women are treated like property and are believed to be trivial and empty-headed. The Wife attacks these attitudes and scolds her husbands for attempting to impose these beliefs on her, and she also successfully contests the misogynistic attitudes expressed in Jankin's "*Book of Wicked Wives*".

However, as discussed before, in the portrayal of the Wife's character it is important to acknowledge the way in which the Wife, while challenging these attitudes, embodies the very same faults she is challenging. For example she mentions her husband's "*fals suspecioun*" of Jankin, arguing that she wouldn't want him even if her husband was dead, but this is clearly a lie as she begins a relationship with Jankin before the death of her fourth husband. She wishes to be praised as a true wife despite her admission of promiscuity and marital infidelity. She accuses her husbands of being unfair towards her, yet she acknowledges the way she wilfully deceives them. She criticises the way women are judged by appearances, yet she herself uses her clothing to gain attention.

The Wife's character undoubtedly challenges the gender stereotype of women as weak and submissive. In her marriages she clearly is the dominant partner and successfully obtains mastery over her husbands, forcefully asserting her will to achieve her desires. Her depiction of men highlights their inadequacies and also challenges gender stereotypes: men are miserly, irritable, easily fooled, and easily manipulated and controlled through their own desires. Comically the Wife argues that it is men who should be patient, meek and have a "*sweete spiced conscience*".

Interestingly in the Tale, the purpose of the old hag, and perhaps the Queen is to educate the Knight about the ways of women. The Knight after his transgression against women embarks on a quest to discover what women most desire; the Knight's failure to uncover the answer suggests male ignorance regarding women. The fact that the Knight accepts the Lady's values and gives over mastery to her means that he can have a wife who will fulfil his desires of beauty and truthfulness. The errant Knight has changed his attitude



towards women and the Tale concludes with his understanding of female experience. Many critics take issue with this conclusion: the ending of the Wife's Prologue boasts she obtains "*maistrie, al the soveraynetee*" over Jankin which contrasts with the Lady who cedes authority and offers complete submission to her husband.

The true nature of "*gentillesse*" and nobility

The Loathly Lady's discussion on "*gentillesse*", where she lectures her new husband on the definition of true nobility, is the moral climax of the Wife's Tale. In the Middle Ages the virtue of nobility was defined by social rank and breeding and therefore an unobtainable ideal for those of lower status. In the resolution of the Tale the old hag uses a scholarly digression to insist on her equality (or even superiority) to the Knight, arguing that she is not lower in worth as a result of her low birth or poverty.

The Knight, though a representative of courtly manners and chivalry, clearly demonstrates he is somewhat lacking in the virtues associated with these qualities. His behaviour towards the young maiden indicates that true nobility is not inherent, passed on by birth; he is exploitive of those in a weaker position, unworthy of his rank, and the fact that he is condemned to death shows how reprehensible the act is. His treatment of the old woman is also disrespectful: he is discourteous towards her and is superficial in his rejection of her as a low-born, ugly old woman. In her sermon, the Lady highlights the falsity of the Knight's claim to nobility. She ridicules him and other "*gentil men*" for their insincerity, stating that "*Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen*", clearly castigating male behaviour and challenging the Knight's belief in his superiority.

The Loathly Lady provides a convincing and comprehensive explanation of the true nature of "*gentillesse*" and nobility and uses Dante and classical and religious references to support her arguments. The fact that the Lady does not misquote or manipulate these references (as the Wife does in her Prologue) lends weight to her argument and perhaps suggests that the hag's views may be closely aligned with Chaucer's. The Lady deconstructs the commonly held views of "*gentillesse*", claiming that it is not inherited from our ancestors. We are not born with it and neither is it based on possessions or social status. She eloquently argues for the divine nature of "*gentillesse*", that true nobility is granted through God's grace, and she refers to Seneca to support her point that nobility is based on noble deeds.

The speech may be read as the hag's claim to sovereignty over the Knight. The Lady may be low-born, but she argues that as she hopes for the grace of God to live virtuously without sin, she is noble. She successfully challenges the Knight's criticisms, arguing that Jesus was also poor and that poverty is not a sin, and she should be respected because of her old age. As the Tale concludes the Knight accepts the Lady's mastery, which is then immediately returned to him, perhaps suggesting that women will not abuse their position, and that mutual respect and deference to the other partner will lead to a joyful union.

As a final point on this theme, one might consider the extent to which this concept of gentility can be applied to the Wife of Bath herself with all her vices and faults. While her story might be considered a didactic tale for the benefit of the company, it is clear that she does not conduct herself with the virtuousness she idealises in her Tale. Perhaps the story is an attempt to elevate her status and insist on equality with the other pilgrims.



A02 Poetic Methods

You will need to analyse ways in which the poet uses form, structure, language and tone to shape meanings in the poem. You will need to communicate clear, well-developed exploration of the writer's methods, in relation to the key terms of the question.

Poetic Voice

Alisoun, as the narrator of *The Wife of Bath's* Prologue, speaks with an individualised voice which critics note is very distinct from the conventional narratorial voices of some of the other Tales. Firstly the monologue is a markedly female voice offering a womanly perspective on the subject of female sovereignty in marriage – only two other narrators in *The Canterbury Tales* are female. The Wife offers a highly subjective, first-person account of her personal experiences in relationships, with the narrative taking the form of an explanation – along with Alisoun's plentiful opinions on the subject. However it is important to consider the fact that the persona of the Wife is a device employed by Chaucer, a male writer, to present the theme of mastery, and we must question the extent to which he endorses the Wife's views.

The Wife's Prologue is grounded in realism. Her narrative is a confession, and at the beginning of her discussion of her marriages she insists on the truthfulness of her account, "*I shal seye sooth*". The Wife insists on providing a realistic account of her private life, using intimate details of her marriage to support her comments. She speaks with an engaging and energetic voice. She is emphatic in her arguments on marriage and men and easily silences counter-arguments, as is evident in her handling of the Pardoner's interruption. In his portrayal of the Wife, Chaucer creates a down-to-earth practical character, a shrewd, determined and opinionated woman who freely expresses her disdain for men. This is evident in the use of direct address:

*"Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?
Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?
She is honoured overall the she goth;
I sitte at home; I have no thrifty clooth."*

The Wife's use of "*olde kaynard*", meaning lazy or cowardly person, suggests her contempt for her husband and her challenge to his male authority.

As stated before in the discussions of the Wife's character, there are many contradictions apparent in her narrative. Any analysis of the Wife should consider the effect of Chaucer's use of the unreliable narrator, which is often used to comic effect. Although the Wife claims truthfulness in her Prologue, she admits to deception and manipulation for her own ends. For example she lies about her liaison with Jankin, she calls her husband an "*old barrellful of lies*" yet admits to being false herself, and boasts of how she was able to gain mastery over her husbands "*by sleighte, or force*". She discloses how she was able to seduce Jankin by using a trick her mother had taught her. She "*falsely swore*" that he had enchanted her but convincingly argues elsewhere that she had married him for love: there is a clear conflict between the Wife's presentation of herself and the details revealed.



Also the Wife's use of textual references are suspect, for example her misuse of St Paul's arguments on marriage. This complicates the reader's trust in her narrative and invites us to consider the character's flaws.

The narrative voice of the Tale is markedly different. The perspective switches to a third-person perspective in a mythical past: "*In th' olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour/Of which that Britons speken greet honour,/Al was this land fulfild of fayerye*". Here the narrator takes on a more formal style akin to the beginnings of romances, suggesting an omniscient control over the narrative. The references to Arthur and fairies suggests a departure from the sexually humorous and pragmatic attitudes of the Prologue, instead setting the tone for a civilised courtly romance. Many critics find the Wife's choice of tale inconsistent with her character, as the speakers generally choose a tale that accords with their character. The Wife's penchant for bawdiness and her practical concerns suggest that a fabliau would be more appropriate and indeed research indicates that a plainer tale, possibly the Shipman's was originally intended for the Wife so 'Why does the Wife of Bath tell a romance?' Some critics suggest that the romance genre represents Alisoun's idealised views of love, and a tale where an ageing woman regains her youth and marital bliss with a young man might suggest her own desires. Alternatively they note the ways in which the Wife subverts the courtly romance genre – see the Literary Context section for further discussion.

Although the Tale uses a more formal discourse associated with romance conventions, some consideration should be given to the ways in which the Wife's voice interjects into the narrative, for example in her criticism of friars as she seizes the opportunity to insult the clergyman who rudely interrupted the Prologue. There is the use of first person ("*I speke of manye hundred yeres ago*"), the use of digressions, and occasional animal references that are distinctive of the Wife's narrative, all of which serve as reminders of the Wife's presence, connecting the Prologue and the Tale.

Imagery

Animal imagery

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is littered with numerous animal references from the small and meek to the powerful and wild. Animal imagery is used extensively throughout *The Canterbury Tales* to emphasise characters' physical features. It is interesting then that the Wife, whose description in the *General Prologue* emphasises her physical nature, also uses many animal metaphors and similes with regard to herself, suggesting her own physicality and primal instincts.

Birds: there are several references to birds in both the Prologue and Tale. The Wife depicts herself as a falconer - "*with empty hand men may none haukes lure*" – suggestive of her dominance and control in marriage. This description contrasts with her later use of bird imagery to describe her days of youth. She says she was "*joly as a pye*" and could "*synge, ywis as any nyghtyngale*" when drinking wine. We might take the nightingale reference as a humorous statement and the magpie simile also suggests something negative in that magpies are associated with hoarding and mischievous chatter, suggestive of the character's gossiping and materialism. There are other bird references: the Knight is likened to an owl in his attempt to hide away on his wedding night, and the domestic "*hen*" reference serves to deflate the knight's pretensions of nobility.



Horses: there are several horse images. The wife reveals how “*as an hors I koude byte and whyne*” indicating her wild and uncontrollable nature, and in the *General Prologue* she is described as a good horsewoman. The metaphor that shows her winning back the whip hand (“*He gaf me al the bridel in myn hond,*”) indicates the character’s mastery and control over her husband.

Lion/Lioness: the references to lions in her depiction of her husbands (“*For thogh he looked as a wood leon*” and “*And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun*”) is suggestive of male pride and physical domination. The Wife describes herself as “*Stibourn I was as is a leonesse*” indicating her stubbornness and refusal to submit to her husband’s will.

Domestic imagery

Chaucer uses domestic imagery to depict the Wife’s down-to-earth practical attitudes towards life and sexuality. Images include references to eating and drinking as well as practical domestic items such as barrels, utensils and candles. There are numerous references to flour: when discussing chastity after marriage the Wife claims that she will “*bistowe the flour of al myn age*” indicating her intention to use the gift of her sexuality as best she can and to her advantage. She contrasts her sexual experience with that of the virtuous:

*“Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;
And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,
Oure Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man.”*

The motif of bread is used to symbolise women - the chaste and virtuous are compared to “*pured whete-seed*”, the refined white flour suggestive of the purity of virtuous women, and the coarse “*barly-breed*” depicts those who have sexual experience. The Wife claims that, just as Jesus was able to feed the five thousand with bread, so too can her sexuality and the sexuality of other women refresh many men. She uses the flour metaphor to describe her ageing, explaining that “*The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle, / The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle*”. The white “*flour*” suggests the loss of the beauty of her youth but, ever practical, she intends to make the most of what she has. Here we might have sympathy for the Wife as she wistfully relates the loss of her youth and attractiveness, but it also indicates the Wife’s tendency to treat her sexuality as a commodity.

Language

The study of language must consider how the poet’s use of language characterises the speaker and relates to the subject and thematic concerns of the text. What is noticeable about *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* is Chaucer’s linguistic variety, from the coarse language of the Wife’s sexually explicit comments or the ecclesiastical, financial and legal terminology to the classical literary references, making for a richly exuberant text in terms of language.

Sexual language

Chaucer is known as a bawdy writer, as is notable in other tales such as *The Miller’s Tale*. The Wife is characterised by her coarse use of language and much of the humour of the



text comes from her frank discourse on female sexuality and her lack of restraint. She makes no apology for her sexual voraciousness. Early in her Prologue she turns her discussion to the merits of chastity and claims that while it is ideal for some, she does not want it and claims that she *“wol use myn instrument/As frely as my Makere hath it sent”* thus arguing for female sexual freedom. Note the euphemism of *“instrument”* to refer to her genitalia. This is a frequent device which Chaucer has the Wife brazenly use to refer to the vagina. In her imaginary address to her husbands she asks

*“Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?
Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel!
Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel;
For if I wolde selle my bele chose,
I koude walke as fressh as is a rose;
But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth.”*

The word *“queynte”* is defined as the precursor for the vulgar word ‘cunt’ but according to the Middle English dictionary it means a device or adornment. This euphemism suggests the Wife’s tendency to view her bodily parts as tools for her advancement, which is furthered with the phrase *“bele chose”* (which means ‘pretty thing’) to refer to her genitals. Here the Wife mocks her husbands for their sexual impulses and desire of her *“queynte”* but ridicules them for their wish to be the Wife’s sole lover. The rhetorical question and exclamation suggest her mocking tone as Chaucer has her state that she will keep it just for his pleasure.

She boasts of her own sexual prowess, bragging that her husbands told her she had the best *“quoniam”* and claims that because she is influenced by Venus she is unable to withhold her *“chambre of Venus”*, suggesting her strong sexual appetite. This is furthered by her comment that she did not care whether men were *“short, or long, or blak, or whit”* or from which social rank they came as long as they pleased her sexually. The Wife is similarly crude in her references to the male body. She claims she has chosen her husbands based on their *“nether purs and of here cheste”*, the *“nether purs”* meaning his lower purse but the pun suggests her association of sex and financial gain.

Commercial Language

It is not difficult to notice the commercial and transactional metaphors that pervade the Wife’s discourse about sex and relationships, suggesting the ways in which she sees affairs in terms of financial gain. Notice that in the flour references quoted in the imagery section, she states she will sell her bran. She argues *“That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette/Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement”*, the financial references to *“dette”* and *“paiement”* indicating her views of intercourse as a commodity and her tendency to use her sexuality for profit. She also uses a market analogy later when describing her attraction to Jankin: *“With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;/Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,/And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys”* arguing that sexual attraction is like laying out your merchandise or *“chaffare”*, but if it is too available it is of little value, reinforcing the idea that sexuality is a commodity.

Conversational language

One aspect of the poem that can be easily overlooked when reading it, is the oral nature of the Tale and the ways in which Chaucer establishes the Wife as an imagined storyteller and the other pilgrims as her imagined listeners. This is noticeable in the interactions



between the pilgrims and the various interruptions to the Tale. This device adds to the sense of realism and unifies the various speakers of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The most prominent interruption is perhaps the Pardoner's dismayed response: "*I was aboute to wedde a wyf; alas!/What sholde I bye it on my flesshe so deere?*" The Pardoner's startled response to the Wife's comments on marriage is to claim that they have made him rethink his intention to marry. The Pardoner may offer a typical male response here; however we recall that the description of the Pardoner in the *General Prologue* implies that he is effeminate and perhaps homosexual, so his claims to be put off marriage would have been seen as comical. The interruption also allows us to see the Wife's skill in handling opposition. She quickly silences the Pardoner: "*Abyde!*" quod she, "*my tale is nat bigonne.*" The Wife's forceful presence is notable as she commands the Pardoner to wait until he hears the full tale, and the Pardoner's response shows he accepts her authority. Also the interruption draws attention to the Wife's tendency to digress, and structurally the disruption redirects the narrative back to the main part of the Prologue which is her account of marriage. A similar interruption occurs at the end of the Prologue when the Friar exclaims that he is relieved that the Wife's preamble is over. The Wife again easily handles the situation, seemingly to defer to the Friar but then skilfully weaving an insult regarding Friars into her Tale.

The conversational nature of the text is established through the Wife's distinct voice and speaking patterns. The *General Prologue* describes Alisoun, "*In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe*", emphasising her sociable nature. As a character she is lively and chatty, which Chaucer demonstrates through her use of conversational phrases and sentence structures from natural speech. As an example consider the following: "*But -- Lord Crist! -- whan that it remembreth me/Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,/It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.*" In modern language the Wife exclaims that it tickles her to the bottom of her heart to remember her youth and gaiety. The use of dashes and exclamation marks captures the Wife's emotions as she remembers the vitality of her youth and the idiomatic phrase "*It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote*" reinforces our view of the Wife as a realistic ordinary woman speaking with humour.

Rhetorical features

Finally in our consideration of Chaucer's language, attention must be given to Chaucer's use of rhetorical devices in the Wife's presentation of the argument for female sovereignty. Rhetoric is the art of using language to persuade and takes in a range of devices such as imagery and metaphor. Plato defined rhetoric as "The art of winning the soul by discourse", and Aristotle suggests it is "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion". The use of rhetorical devices makes the Wife's speech more formal in places as Chaucer has her adeptly use a range of rhetorical devices, adding sophistication to her coarse speech.

Rhetorical questions are the most used and easily identifiable feature of the Wife's discourse and while some perhaps provoke laughter, others raise important questions regarding key issues such as gender stereotyping. Near the end of her confession regarding Jankin, the Wife asks the question, "*Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?*" The rhetorical question here makes a valid point about the portrayal of gender. The metaphorical painted lion she refers to parallels the depiction of men in literature. She references an Aesopian fable where the lion protests about a picture depicting a man killing a lion and points out that if the lion had been the artist the representation would have been different. Her point is a valid one: as men are the writers they will depict



males favourably. She responds to her own question, stating *“By God, if wommen hadde writen stories...They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse”*, highlighting the inequality that exists in the cultural construction of gender. This shows a very profound understanding of sexual politics on the part of the Wife: that rather than reflecting any truth about the subject, the construction is more about the prejudice of the creator.

Listing is used frequently, making the Wife seem even more emphatic in her arguments. Notice the recurrent use of *“And”*, *“And but”*, *“And to”* and the long sentence structures as the Wife builds up a strong case for her argument, adding in details and further examples to support her argument. Notice also the use of repetition by the Loathly Lady as she lists the definitions of poverty to emphasise her point that poverty allows for greater wisdom, patience and understanding of oneself and God.

Direct Address and challenging the audience is another key technique used by the Wife. For example, Chaucer has her challenge her listeners, many of whom are of the clergy, to explain where *“hye God defended marriage/By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me”* in order to call into question the Church’s use of the Bible to criticise second marriages. As is evident here, the Wife cleverly anticipates the other pilgrims’ arguments and negates them before they are expressed.

Irony is the creation of a gap between ostensible and intended meaning to draw attention to the latter. Attention might be given to the Wife’s ironic treatment of her male subjects, her husbands, the Knight and the Friar for example. We might also consider Chaucer’s ironic treatment of the Wife herself, for example her use of Biblical teaching to support her argument for sexual freedom, quoting Genesis, *“God bad us for to wexe and multiplye”* but without acknowledging the true meaning of the verse, that sex was designed for procreation.

Examples in the Wife’s narrative are in the form of Biblical and classical references, and as previously discussed, these digressions add to the Wife’s arguments regarding male and female relationships. Even though the Wife claims personal experience, she frequently alludes to the *“auctoritee”* of Biblical stories and Scripture to validate her liberal opinions on relationships and gender roles. Often Chaucer chooses to have the Wife misuse or misquote the reference, perhaps to reinterpret the Bible in line with her own female perspective on issues raised, perhaps Chaucer seeks to highlight the absurdity of her views, or as some critics suggest, to highlight the confused and ambiguous arguments of the clergy who often appropriate Scripture for their own ends. The use of classical and literary allusion is also notable in the text, particularly in the Loathly Lady’s pillow sermon on *“gentillesse”* (see Theme section) where she refers to Dante, Seneca, Boethius, Juvenal and Valerius in her argument that *“gentillesse”* is based on virtuous deeds.

Structure

At first *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* seems long and rambling with several digressions that make the narrative difficult to follow, particularly for modern students. However a closer analysis reveals that it is well constructed and its disjointed structure is part of the design. Answers must reflect on how Chaucer’s organisation creates meaning, how it relates to the subject matter and the thematic concerns and how a range of structuring devices are used for particular effects.

The most striking feature of the text as a whole is the length of the Prologue, which is



twice the length of the main Tale. The Friar's complaint that "*This is a long preamble of a tale*" draws attention to the lengthy introduction. The imbalance is particularly noteworthy as most of the other tales have short Prologues, the next longest being the Pardoner's Tale whose Prologue is approximately 133 lines in length. The Wife's Prologue most certainly overshadows the Tale itself, a curiosity that leads critics to investigate the importance of the Prologue and its purpose in relation to the Tale. Chaucer's choice of structure perhaps relates to the overall themes, illustrating the Wife's mastery and sense of self-importance. The purpose of a prologue is to establish the character and set the context for the tale, and the Wife certainly takes advantage of the opportunity to air her views on marriage, allowing further insight into the issues raised. We might view her Prologue as a 'confession' or an opportunity for self-advertisement in her quest to find her next husband. It is also important to note that Chaucer uses it to create a persona, creating a distance between the narrator and himself as a writer.

Despite the tensions between the Prologue and the Tale, Chaucer's use of structural devices allow for a reading that views *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* as a single text with a dual structure. There are obvious connections bridging the two; for example the Prologue can be seen as a framing device that sets the context for the Tale, and both are unified by the theme of mastery and power within relationships (see Themes). The two sections are also linked in the form of the Wife's distinct narrative voice, which makes her presence felt in the Tale.

The text mainly follows a chronological order but this is complicated by the numerous digressions. The Wife begins with her justification of multiple marriages and then proceeds to discuss her husbands. However, she also includes details that relate to the later narrative, for example mentioning her husband's suspicions about her attraction to Jankin and his golden hair – this can only be her fourth husband, yet she mentions this detail before she begins talking about her fourth husband and her affair with Jankin some 150 lines later. The Wife herself even becomes confused by her own narrative, at one point losing track of her point entirely, "*But now, sire, lat me se what I shal seyn./A ha! By God, I have my tale ageyn*", a device which Chaucer uses to capture the lapses and recoveries of spoken language. As discussed previously, these digressions can be used for rhetorical effect in support of the Wife's argument or to indicate her ability as a storyteller as she manipulates and controls the narrative for her own ends. The Tale similarly follows a simple chronological order with digressions on women's desires and "*gentillesse*" or the Wife's opinions on the story.

Form

There are various ways to consider Chaucer's use of form. The text could be viewed as a dramatic monologue where the Wife provides a confession of her transgressions in marriage, and justifies these to expound her views on gender relationships or perhaps to attract her sixth husband.

Chaucer developed the now traditional poetic form of heroic couplets, iambic pentameters where pairs of consecutive lines rhyme. Iambic pentameter is a poetic line of ten syllables following the pattern of alternating unstressed/stressed syllables. Chaucer is seen as the originator of the iambic pentameter, a form which was to dominate English literature in the following centuries. In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* Chaucer uses the form to represent the rhythms of natural speech. At times the effect is to make the Wife sound conversational and at other times it serves to give her rhetorical grandeur.



A03 Contexts

Biographical context

Chaucer is an acclaimed English poet and is widely regarded as the first English writer. John Dryden, poet and critic of the seventeenth century referred to Chaucer as “the father of English poetry”. As with Shakespeare, there are unknown areas in Chaucer’s life. He was born about 1340 and died in about 1400, living through the reigns of Edward III and Richard II. Although a commoner, he was born into a relatively affluent family that owned a wine business but he and his family had aristocratic connections: in his earlier years he served as a page to the Countess of Ulster. He fought during the Hundred Years War and later acted in various roles as a diplomat, esquire and administrator to the monarch at the time. He was also highly connected through his marriage to Phillipa Roet, daughter of Sir Payne Roet and sister-in-law to John of Gaunt.

One important detail that intrigues biographers is the evidence that Chaucer may have been involved in rape. In *Geoffrey Chaucer*, G.A. Rudd discusses the evidence regarding the charge of ‘*raptus*’ brought by Cecily Champaign. A formal document proves that the case was dropped by the courts in 1380, although what the term ‘*raptus*’ means has led to much critical speculation with some critics arguing that it refers to ‘abduction’ and not a sexual assault, and in any case the accusation does not prove guilt – it may have been an accusation for compensation. Whatever the truth, some critics link this charge to the actions of the Knight, seeing the penance of the character as Chaucer’s apologia.

Chaucer’s travels to Europe brought in him into contact with the works of the influential writers of the period such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio who wrote in Latin and Italian. The language of the court at home was French whereas English was the crude and common language which had developed from Anglo-Saxon. Chaucer chose to write in the English vernacular using the dialect that was spoken in the capital. Much scholarly attention has been given to Chaucer’s contribution to the development of English and the way in which the writer transformed the dialect into a language (see Christopher Cannon’s *The Making of Chaucer’s English: A Study of Words*). English Literature does not begin with Chaucer; for example *Beowulf* which predates Chaucer’s work by several centuries is written in Old English (Anglo-Saxon) and is the oldest surviving text in English Literature. *The Canterbury Tales* is written in what is called Middle English.

Despite a very busy career in public life Chaucer found time to write, with his most notable works including *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women* and of course *The Canterbury Tales*.

Historical Context

Attitudes to women in the medieval period

Many of the cultural attitudes towards women were defined by Christianity and the Bible.



Mary, Mother of Christ, is the ideal of chastity and motherhood and has been the perfect model of womanhood for centuries. The misogyny expressed by Jankin is typical of anti-feminist attitudes towards women; because of the transgressions of Eve, women were thought of as temptresses who led to the corruption of men. The Wife blames religion for men's negative attitudes towards women when she claims:

*“He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves
Than been of goode wyves in the Bible.
For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves.”*

Medieval society was patriarchal, dominated by men with women having little or no authority socially and economically. Women were completely dependent on men and there were relatively few options available for them – they could either become wives or nuns. Marriages for women were often arranged at a young age, and women were expected to be subservient to their husbands. Marriage was the only opportunity that women had for social advancement and this is notable in Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife, whose marriages allow for climbing the social ranks. In marriage women had no right to property or control over money, as all worldly goods were owned by the husband. It was not until the Married Women's Property Act in 1870 that women gained the right to inherit property. Common women like Alisoun would have had domestic chores and been involved in cottage industries such as baking and weaving. Also relevant to the Wife of Bath, is women's lack of education – it is unlikely that Alisoun would have been literate and even less likely that she would have been familiar with the classical works she refers to in her narrative.

Class and social mobility

Chaucer lived at a time of much social upheaval, a tension which is reflected in *The Canterbury Tales* and the diverse range of characters that form the pilgrimage. England was a feudal society with clear class distinctions between the aristocracy and the commoners. However, in the 1300s the income and living standards of peasants improved, which raised their expectations and led to social unrest such as the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. These changes are reflected in the wide array of Canterbury pilgrims and the Wife's social climbing attitude as she seeks to better herself. She belongs to the petty bourgeoisie as a small business owner in cloth manufacturing, an important trade in England at the time. Also the Loathly Lady's insistence that gentility is based on character not noble birth demonstrates a similar attitude.

Another important factor at the time was the opposition to and eventual deposition of Richard II in 1399. The thematic issue of challenging accepted authority is a significant concern in the Wife's narrative. During Richard's reign many challenged his authoritarian and tyrannical style of leadership. Chaucer's subtle comments on the abuses of power and the need to create a more stable environment by sharing power perhaps relates to Richard's autocratic rule and the need to allow some autonomy.



Literary Context

The Canterbury Tales

As should be apparent at this stage, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* is part of a larger collection of tales called *The Canterbury Tales*. The framing story for the Tales is that a group of pilgrims are on a journey to visit the shrine of Thomas Beckett and decide to have a story-telling competition with a free meal as the prize. The collection was left unfinished with twenty four stories – Chaucer originally intended each of the thirty pilgrims to tell four stories, two on their way to the shrine and two on their return. The *General Prologue* acts as a frame for the collection linking the characters and providing a description of them. Also the characters tend to appear in the other tales as can be seen in the Wife's tale where the Pardoner, Friar, Summoner and Host all interject, a device used to connect the tales.

Much scholarly debate surrounds the intended order and grouping of each tale, with the Wife's Tale frequently regarded as part of the 'marriage group' which includes *The Merchant's, Clerk's and Franklin's Tales*. All of these poems offer alternative perspectives on the topic of marriage; thus it is impossible to see any particular view as definitively Chaucer's. In his tale for example the Franklin challenges the Wife's argument for female mastery in relationships, arguing that mastery and love cannot exist together.

Courtly Romance

There are several literary contexts within which to consider *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, for example anti-feminist literature of the medieval period, or as a sermon or exemplum on Christian morality. The Tale itself resembles medieval folk-stories, and the genres of courtly romance and the Breton lays, but it is important to consider the ways in which Chaucer subverts these conventions.

The Wife's opening clearly places the Tale in the mythological realm of King Arthur and is suggestive of a courtly tale about knightly chivalry and honour. The plot of the Tale draws heavily on other tales of the time where the hero, who often has committed some kind of crime, must go on a quest (in this case to discover the secret of what women most desire). This is a feature of well-known medieval texts such as *"The Tale of Florent"*, *"The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell"* or *"The Marriage of Sir Gawain"*. These tales also feature a loathly lady whom the hero must marry but who then transforms into a beauty when he agrees to her sovereignty. The Loathly Lady is a medieval archetype which can also be found in Irish mythology.

However, the Tale defies the expectations of a courtly romance. The setting up of the romance in the first thirty lines is undercut by the character of the rapist Knight who abuses his position to overpower a vulnerable woman. The sentencing delivered by the Queen and her ladies and the central importance of the Loathly Lady foregrounds female authority in what is traditionally a male-centred story. Also subverting the idea of the traditional romance are the Wife's digressions that serve to comment on and question the nature of male/female relationships and her conclusion where she sees *"parfit joye"* as sexual gratification for women and a short life for miserly, old or angry men – not exactly the conclusion that one would expect from a courtly romance.



A04 Connections

Students should be keenly aware that there are equal marks available for their treatment of the given extract and the wider text.

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections within and between the extract provided and the wider text, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Explore the connections** between the extract printed in the Resource Booklet and the wider text, and the external/contextual information you have studied. Always bear in mind that the Driving Objective for this unit is **A02** (Poetic Methods).
- **Note both similarities and differences** – this could be between voices, themes, aspects of imagery or any other techniques you find.
- **Make sure the connections noted are significant and relevant.**



Specimen question:

By referring closely to Extract **1 (a)** printed in the accompanying Resource Booklet and other appropriately selected parts of the text, and making use of relevant external contextual information on medieval attitudes to marriage, examine the poetic methods which Chaucer uses to present the theme of marriage.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of the given extract and other relevant parts of the text.

The extract consists of lines 1-45 of the Prologue. It begins “*Experience, though noon auctoritee...*” and ends “*Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal.*”

In planning an orderly and relevant response to this question, candidates will need to demonstrate an understanding of medieval attitudes to marriage. Contextual material should be considered insofar as it is relevant to the key terms of the question.

Mark Scheme:

The information below is intended to exemplify the type of content which may be seen in responses. Reference should be made to some of the following points, and all other valid comments will be rewarded.

A01: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts using appropriate concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.

- knowledge and understanding of the text in appropriate reference and quotation
- order and relevance in conveying ideas
- appropriate and accurate expression
- appropriate use of literary terminology
- skillful and meaningful insertion of quotation

A02: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.

Remind yourself of the advice about how best to handle poetic methods in your response.

- use of heroic verse with variation (enjambment, reversal of foot, caesurae) to present a lively consideration of marriage
- use of antithesis and unequivocal language in opening lines of Prologue (“*Experience/ auctoritee...woe that is in marriage*”) establishes that the Wife will present a negative view of marriage
- commercial/contractual imagery (“*paye his dette*”; “*make his paiement*”) renders marital relations transactional
- use of contrast in characterisation of husbands
- use of allusion to authoritative opinions about marriage
- symbolism of Jankin’s book tossed on the fire used to present struggle for control within marriage
- use of structure: continuity of thematic interest (marriage) between Prologue and Tale

A03: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

Remind yourself of the advice about how best to handle contextual information in your response.



Medieval attitudes to marriage

- Anti-feminist literature regarding marriage:
 - St. Jerome's attack on Jovinian
 - St. Paul: the ideal state is celibacy but marriage is preferable to promiscuity; marriage is indissoluble
 - Letter to the Corinthians ("It is better to marry than to burn with passion..."); Letter to the Ephesians; Letter to Timothy
 - Theophrastus and the Golden book of Marriage
- Marriage for economic reasons rather than a love match
- Patriarchal society: submission and obedience expected from a wife and from women generally

A04: Explore connections across literary texts

Make connections between the Prologue and the Tale and between different parts of each in a detailed, meaningful and relevant way. These connections may be thematic, contextual, or they may concern poetic methods. The key term of the question, as always, should be kept clearly in mind.

Remember:

- Stick to the key terms used in the question
- Think what the question is really asking you to do
- Make connections throughout, demonstrating your knowledge of the poem and the poet, and your ability to link concepts, ideas and references.



Useful Links and Activities

Plot and Structure

- Discuss the significance of each section of the Prologue and Tale and analyse its relevance to develop each of the main themes of mastery, marriage, gentility.
- Collect a range of discourse markers used by the Wife. How do these signify a change in the direction of the narrative?
- Compare the endings of the Prologue and the main Tale, noting their similarities and differences. What moral or learning, if any, is highlighted?

Character

- Analyse the description of the Wife in the General Prologue.
- Compare the portrayal of the first three husbands with Jankin. List the similarities and differences between these characters.

Theme

- Research the Church's views on women and marriage by investigating some of the Bible references the Wife alludes to and ideas she challenges. Summarise the Bible references in your own words and then explain how the Wife uses or challenges them. The following website will help you <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/bible-marr.asp>

(Some references are listed below)

Genesis 1: 22

Genesis 1: 9

Genesis 3:16

John 4

Mark 10:7

Ephesians 5:22-24

Poetic voice

- Look at the section where the Wife discusses her first three marriages.
 - What do her language and insults suggest about her attitude to her husbands and their relationship?
 - What is the effect of the direct address?
- Listen to readings and performances of the poem, for example:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3cv0m7qStk>
or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rVKb_MmPUI.
Compare this with modern versions such as Julie Walter's portrayal of the Wife in the BBC 2003 adaptation.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFx3VdC0A9I>

Language

- Make a list of recurring unfamiliar words/phrases in the poem and create your own Chaucer glossary.
- Collect key quotations linking to:
 - Finance/commercialism



- Visual descriptions especially those that focus on the body
- Birds and animals
- Flowers and plants
- Fire

Context

- The following website could be used for further research on Chaucer and *The Wife of Bath* <http://writersinspire.org/writers/geoffrey-chaucer>
- Read the information regarding the literary context and further research the following topics in the medieval period: women, attitudes to marriage, anti-feminism, social rank, the Church and pilgrimages.

Additional Activities

- Several university style lectures are available on youtube.com such as Ted Sherman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R18OcccBhU8> or Bob Ahlersmeyer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ago9D4KTeTk>. Listen and add to your notes on the text.

**GLOSSARY** - this glossary is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Alliteration	the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity.
Anaphora	a rhetorical feature where the same word or phrase is deliberately repeated at the beginning of a sentence or clause.
Archetype	literal meaning: original model; used in literature to indicate a recurring type or symbol.
Caesura	a break or pause in the middle of the poetic line, usually indicated by a punctuation mark such as a semi-colon, colon or full stop. The effect is to break the rhythm of the line.
Chronological sequence	the sequencing of events into the order in which they happened in time.
Digression	going aside or diverting from the main subject.
Enjambment	the running on of the poetic line into the next, or from one stanza into the next without a break. The opposite of end-stopped lines.
Euphemism	a mild word used in place of another word which might be considered unpleasant, harsh or offensive.
Fabliau	a humorous, bawdy tale often found in early French poetry.
First-person perspective	where the poem is spoken from the viewpoint of a speaker or persona who is talking directly about him/herself, usually indicated by 'I' or 'we'.
Feminist/anti-feminist	support of the belief that women should be treated as equals to men/opposition to the ideas of feminism.
Hyperbole	language that uses exaggeration for particular effect.
Imagery	This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects. (See advice on discussing imagery).
Idiom/Idiomatic	group of words established in everyday speech, but where the meaning is not deducible from the literal meaning of the words used.
Implied listener	the reader or audience the author imagines as the addressee of the text; the person to whom the poem is addressed.



Juxtaposition	deliberate placing of two contrasting characters, things, ideas close together for a particular purpose.
Metaphor	where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
Meter/Metre	metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
Misogyny	the hatred or distrust of women.
Monologue	a long speech made by one character.
Motif	a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.
Persona	See speaker.
Personification	to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
Pun	a word or phrase that has more than one meaning, often used humorously.
Rhetoric	the art of using language to persuade; rhetoric takes in a range of devices.
Rhetorical question	a question which does not require or cannot receive an answer; it is used for a number of purposes.
(Courtly) Romance	a type of prose and poetic narrative popular during the Middle Ages. Texts usually focused on idealised love, nobility and chivalry and featured knights and ladies or maidens, and quests to demonstrate love.
Simile	where something is directly compared to something else, using “like” or “as”.
Speaker	the person or speaking voice narrating the poem, often but not always associated with the poet.
Symbol/symbolism	where what is shown, often a material object (the symbol) comes by association to stand for or represent something else, usually non-material e.g. the loss of Samson’s hair symbolizing his loss of strength, or Jankin’s damaged book symbolizing his reduced power in his marriage.
Theme	a main idea or concern explored in a work of art.
Tone	the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, conveyed through use of language, rhythm and punctuation. (See advice on tone).



Unreliable narrator a first person narrative where the views or comments of the narrator cannot be trusted.