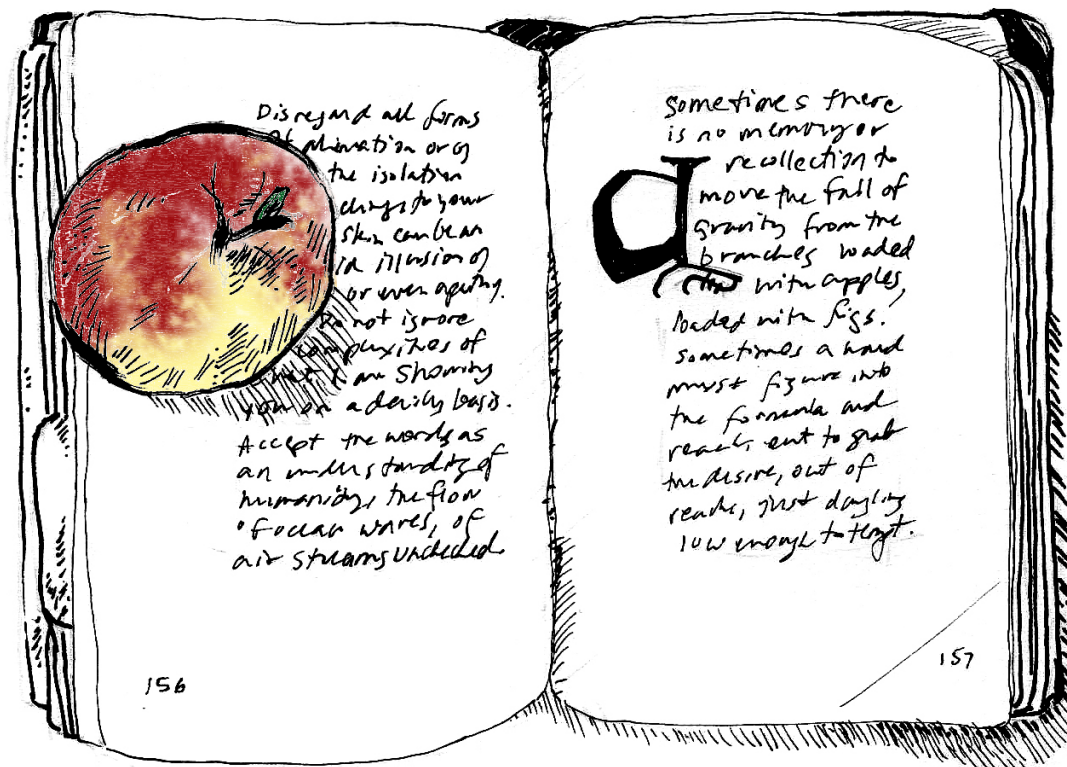


# The Wife of Bath



# *The Wife of Bath*

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**Geoffrey Chaucer's creation of Alice (Alison), the Wife of Bath, sparks much discussion.**

Her prologue and story both provoke anti-woman sentiments and as well pro-feminist concepts of the medieval era.

- she is shown as a successful business woman after all
- the material she presents belongs to what some critics term as “The Marriage Group,” a collection of stories questioning which gender has more control in a marriage; the theme is taken up first by the Lawyer and then continues with the Clerk, the Merchant, and finally the Franklin
- most of her characteristics and reactions to situations echo anti-feminine parodies common in this era (she shows strong sense of vanity and self-pride); however, her frank honesty and bold assertions portray her as one who enjoys a robust life

# *The Wife of Bath*

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**The style of her introduction follows a medieval genre of confession.**

Critic William Mead proposes that her opening statement is an open, personal defense of her multiple marriages and likewise affirms her views on married life.

- however, rather than repenting for her lifestyle, she is openly confessing her moral standards to a point of pride to the full company of travelers (and the reader) in a celebratory style
- she states proudly: “A great perfection is virginity, / [...]The ones desiring to live perfectly— / and by your leave my lords, that isn’t me. / For I’ll bestow the flower of my life / In all the acts and fruits of being wife” (ll. 111-114)
- Chaucer uses less poetic devices in her monologue, choosing instead a rather coarse, common vernacular; the longer her speech, the coarser her language
- furthermore, as it was custom at the time, notice she lets you know she has been married since she was twelve years old: see lines 4-7

# *The Wife of Bath*

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**In some regards, the character of Alison contradicts the expected notions of a model medieval wife.**

Women were blamed for many of the world's ills, based on the accepted "history" from Genesis and the actions of Eve.

- furthermore, Mead discusses how celibate clerks often recorded material discussing the "evils of matrimony" (396)
- for his part, Chaucer uses Alison as a point of comic relief, placing her tales just after the dramatic hagiography-style tale from the Lawyer which details a harrowing story of Custance (Constance) who endures multiple hardships all the while maintaining a constant sense of faith for her Christian-values in a rather submissive fashion
- Chaucer, who loves irony, creates the wife of Bath as the complete inverse of the expected meek medieval woman, and as a result, she appears as a more realistic portrayal of feminine will when compared against the fictitious Custance.

# *The Wife of Bath*

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## **Another layer of irony exists in her choice of defense.**

Throughout the opening section of her prologue, notice Alison uses multiple references to male characters in the Bible, both Old and New Testament.

- in particular she makes reference to the Samaritan Woman at the Well, from the Gospel of John; in that particular story, Jesus has a conversation with a woman to whom he reveals he knows her past history of five husbands and the fact she living with a sixth man, unmarried; Chaucer specifically has Alison misunderstand and misread the full point of the biblical narrative, showing off aspects of her personality
- she also insists: “How many men was she allowed to marry?” (l. 23), and then proceeds to state how God “bade us to increase and multiply— / The noble text I well appreciate [...] / Why then should men speak disapprovingly?” (ll. 28-29 / 34); in this fashion she is turning the argument around into a counterpoint against the anti-women literature which existed in her lifetime

# *The Wife of Bath*

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**In addition, she uses as example other biblical characters.**

Solomon

Lamech (a descendent of Cain; first polygamist)

Abraham

Jacob

the Apostle Paul

- throughout her speech she name drops additional Saints
- she also debates rhetorical arguments presented by the ancients and current thinkers of the day
- often she presents *double entendres*, risque phrases and wordings to prove her points of argument
- the more she argues against the misogynist texts and stereotypes, unfortunately she shows how her personality follows the expectations of a “shrew”— the stereotypical badgering wife

# Geneva Bible, 1599

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## **from Ephesians 5:22-33**

**22** Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord.

**23** For the husband is the wife's head, even as Christ is the head of the Church, and the same is the Saviour of his body.

**24** Therefore as the Church is in subjection to Christ, even so let the wives be to their husbands in everything.

**25** Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it,

**26** That he might sanctify it, and cleanse it by the washing of water through the word,

**27** That he might make it unto himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blame.

**28** So ought men to love their wives, as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself.

# Geneva Bible, 1599

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- 29** For no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord doeth the Church.
- 30** For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.
- 31** For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh.
- 32** This is a great secret, but I speak concerning Christ, and concerning the Church.
- 33** Therefore every one of you, do ye so, let every one love his wife, even as himself, **and let the wife see that she fear her husband.**



# *The Wife of Bath*

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## **Alison is far from meek or afraid of her husbands.**

In addition, she uses sex as a means of controlling their behavior.

- she uses the word “payement”—your modern text translates the word as “emolument” (l. 131)— in terms of profit and salary; in the end she uses sexual allusions in terms of accounting and compensation— men pay a “salary” to their wives with their “sely instrument” (l. 138); for men their tools are used for simply for urination or procreation
- she will use her own equipment to the purpose of gaining control (see lines 149-159).
- she promptly falls into an in depth history of her past: of her five husbands, “I’ll tell the truth on husbands that I’ve had, / As three of them were good and two were bad” (ll. 195-196)— and she proceeds to go in to bawdy detail of her personal life (review lines 202-223)
- she includes a lengthy tirade of complaints she uses on her husbands (see lines 235-377)

# *The Wife of Bath*

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**Her language at this point becomes rather raunchy at times.**

More than once she uses the Middle English word “queinte,” a word Chaucer likes to use frequently throughout the full text as well.

- this word represents the female genitals
- your modern English translation censored the use of the wording:  
notably in line 333, Ecker and Crook use the word “quite”  
and again in line 444, they use they phrase “my thing” as a polite substitute
- it is important to pick up on the fact that this business woman from Bath is freely using the slang term, which shows she has a sense of independence and self identity, self definition over her own femininity— which is one of the reasons people herald her as an early feminist: just as she controled her five husbands with sexual acts and sexual favors, she uses her anatomy under her own control— a rare declaration in any form of English literature
- one of her major arguments she uses against her husbands is shown by her statement: “You won’t be [...] Master of both my body and my goods” (ll. 313-314)