

## WIFE OF BATH – CHARACTER AND ROLE

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer opens with a description of twenty-nine people who are going on a pilgrimage. Each person has a distinct personality that we can recognize from the way people behave today. He purposely makes The Wife of Bath stand out more compared to the other characters. In Chaucer's "General Prologue," the Wife of Bath is intentionally described in an explicit way to provoke a shocking response. Her clothes, physical features and references to her past are purposely discussed by Chaucer causing the reader to wonder how well she fits the rules imposed by Christian authorities regarding womanly behavior. Women were categorized as saints or sinners by their actions according to Christian tradition. There were two women who represented the sinner or the saint. Eve caused the downfall of all men "supposedly" whereas the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, symbolized purity. The Wife of Bath is a headstrong bold woman of her time. She shows off her Sunday clothes with evident pride, wearing ten pounds of cloth, woven by herself under her hat. Her clothing symbolizes to the reader that she is not timid or shy and also shows off her expertise as a weaver..

Chaucer discusses his words to describe the Wife quite distinctly. His descriptions of her facial and bodily features are sexually suggestive. The features that Chaucer pays attention to describing Alison should be noticed. In the "General Prologue," Chaucer's description involves her physical appearance describing her clothes, legs, feet, hips, and most importantly her gap-tooth, which during that time (according to The Wife), symbolized sensuality and lust. He discusses how she is a talented weaver and devoted Christian who goes on pilgrimages often. This may make the reader believe that she is a religious woman, but the reader later sees that the Wife's reason to go on these pilgrimages is not due to religion. She feels that every place should be seen; this has nothing to do with religion. She may also be dedicated traveller, a medieval tourist who likes to sight see. She is a very self-confident woman who thinks highly of herself and her skills as a cloth maker. The ironic part is when Chaucer adds that she has a gap between her teeth. During the fourteenth century, having a gap between the teeth was symbolic of a sensual nature. She is more interested in love than anything that has to do with homemaking. He also emphasizes that she had "Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five" (Norton 92), which meant that she has been married five times. She is also described as knowing all the "remedies of love" (Norton 92), since she is so experienced with men. One other important element in the portrayal of the Wife is that she is deaf in one ear.

In both "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "Tale," the Wife of Bath discusses marriage, virginity, and most importantly the question of sovereignty. In the "Wife of Bath's Tale," Alison is suggesting control that women should have. She is a strong-willed and dominant woman who herself gets what she wants when she wants it. She cannot accept defeat no matter what the cost. She feels that this is the way things should be and men should obey her. She should not be controlled or told what to do by others, especially by a man. She displays a very sick and power-thirsty attitude when she says, "In wifhood wol I use myn instrument as freely as my Makere hath it sent. If I be dangerous, God yive me sorwe: myn housbonder shal it han both eve and morwe whan that him list come forth and pay his dette. An housbonde wol I have, I wol nat lette, which shal be bother my dettour and my thral, and have his tribulacion withal upon his flesh whil that I am his wif" (Norton 120). She is boldly saying that she wants to use her "instrument" or body as a weapon and that she owns her

husband, who owes her. Since she is his wife she feels he should bow to her. Even this modern day, Alison's attitude disgusts me. I, as a woman, no matter how bad men are, would claim that a man should be a woman's slave.

The Wife of Bath believes that experience is the greatest authority, and since she has been married five times, she certainly considers herself an authority on the. It is ironic to see the even though is not religious but, she uses the Bible as justification to pardon her behavior. The Wife discusses her lives with her five husbands. She also discusses about how she had control over four of her husbands saying "I governed hem so wel after my lawe, (Norton 122) which indicates that she governed them according to her law or her way. Later on, she says "For God it woot, I chidde hem spitously (Norton122). She claims that she is doing this for a God. She is a woman in thirst of attention, not only sexually, but as a person as well. It upsets her when her fifth husband, a clerk, is more interested in books than he was in her.

When she does not establish supremacy over her fifth husband it seems to excite her because she seems to like challenges. While he is reading a collection of stories about how bad women are she snatches the book and rips some pages out. This instantly heats up her husband, and he hits her. This is how she becomes deaf. She pretends to be dead trying to make him feel guilty. Her concern here is not to make him understand what he has done is wrong, but to use her helplessness as away of achieving power and authority over him, which she ultimately gains.

Alison is not a woman who cares about changing the world for the benefit of other women who are subordinate to men. She is not a feminist fighting for the rights of all women. She claims to know what pleasures men because she is experienced. She believes in giving men what they desire, which is sexual pleasure from her. This proves that she is not fighting for liberation of women. This is definitely a non-feministic view. She is using sex to manipulate men just as men do to women because she openly is saying that she will give herself to the man. She definitely stands for sexual freedom. Giving in to the man's desire goes against feministic beliefs. Alison has a choice of not giving in to the man, but she decides to let the man attain his sexual pleasure for his desire not hers because she has experienced sex before and she knows how much men enjoy it. This quotation obviously goes against feminist beliefs, confusing the reader. At first the reader might think that she is trying to win women freedom and liberation. She herself says that women are the cause of men's suffering. Her reasons are selfish filled with greed of sex and control on all men. I cannot in any sense relate to a person like her because she is an extremely selfish, power-hungry, and immoral woman. Her whole character focuses on her craving for sex and her urge to give men pleasures through sex. Even in a modern society today, no person will feel her actions are justified.