

The wife of bath CHARACTERS

THE WIFE (as described in the general prologue)

- ✿ In “The General Prologue” the Wife is introduced and described. She is the only female character (apart from the Prioress) to be described in detail.
- ✿ She is shown to be a large, flamboyant, bold, out-spoken, gap-toothed (gap-toothed was supposed to be a certain sign of luck and travel and a sign of lascivious and sexual disposition) woman with a bold, sanguine complexion. She is rather old for those times.
- ✿ She is rather deaf. Her apparent deafness could suggest a parallel of spiritual deafness; being unwilling or unable to heed proper Christian teaching. Even the gap between her teeth would, in medieval times, be seen as a sign of lasciviousness.
- ✿ She wears bright and prominent clothes (red stockings which shows her wealth and lustfulness). She wears sharp spurs on her heels which could metaphorically suggest how she treats men as well as her horse and emphasizes her masculine and domineering traits.
- ✿ She has had a lot of experience of life; she’s had 5 husbands (and is currently a widow) and has travelled all round Europe on pilgrimages.
- ✿ She is quick to anger but also loves laughing and company
- ✿ She knows all about love and love remedies
- ✿ She is also a skilled cloth maker and is relatively wealthy
- ✿ She was born under the astrological combination of Mars and Venus (Mars hints at masculinity and Venus at femininity) thus telling us that she will have an amalgamation of these qualities
- ✿ She’s been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem 3 times showing that she was physically fit, wealthy and had gone without her husband showing she was in control of her marriages.
- ✿ Her physical description (a brazen, pushy woman with high self-regard and a fondness for the company of men) immediately provokes responses.
- ✿ It is important to remember that medieval audiences would have responded differently as their values and expectations would have been different. Essentially, the whole of the audience would have been Catholic.
- ✿ The audience may have been amused by her outrageous and outspoken views, but they would have been in no doubt that she was flouting the morality of the church. Their views would have been conditioned by their views about the place and role of women in society; that women were inferior and subservient to men.
- ✿ She seems to treat marriage as an opportunity for self-advancement, she is interested in its sexual rather than its procreative aspect.
- ✿ A lot of the things she says are sometimes anti-feminist and do not fit in to a feminist criteria. Perhaps this is the cause of being developed by Chaucer who is a man.

THE FIRST THREE HUSBANDS

- 🐾 They are not differentiated and are just lumped together as “goode men, and riche, and olde”
- 🐾 The Wife feels she can dominate and outwit them and she delights in emphasising their sexual impotence.

HER FORTH HUSBAND

- ★ This husband represents resistance to the Wife's will
- ★ However, he cannot dominate her and she "made him frie", "for verray jalousie"

JANKIN

- He is the only named character apart from the Wife.
- She is 40 when they marry and he is 20
- She married him for love, which gives him power over her, which he exploits with his misogynistic behaviour.
- He possesses a book in which are all the major anti-feminist writings of the period
- He thus tries to assert dominance over her
- This culminates in their fight; he retaliates against her assault.
- This is his last act of resistance and he is subservient thereafter.

THE KNIGHT

- He represents traditional male power and domination over women, which will be reversed by the end of the tale.
- After his rape, he becomes subservient.

THE HAG

- She is a supernatural figure with the power to transform herself into a beautiful woman at the end.
- It is the representation of dominant women who have absolute power over their fate and their behaviour.
- She is not a consistent character.
- In part she is a counterpart for the wife and also a mouthpiece for Chaucer in her long sermon on the virtues of 'gentillesse'