

THE WIFE OF BATH - SYNOPSIS

- Her real name is Alison and she is one of the 30 characters that assemble at the Tabard Inn at Southwark, all going on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury
- They all tell stories on the way; forming the Canterbury Tales
- The Wife introduces her theme; marriage and the relative power of man and woman within the relationship
- She claims that her own experience is more than sufficient for her to speak of the 'wo that is in marriage' as she has been marriage 5 times and is now a widow
- Therefore she doesn't need to cite authorities such as the Bible to justify her opinions.
- It is ironic though as her prologue and tale are full of references to the kind of authorities she claims she does not need. It is also not clear who suffers the most from the woes of marriage – her or her husbands.
- Her long prologue us mainly an account of her own experiences during marriage
- She begins by justifying her 5 marriages, which are not illegal but seem to contravene the view that a Christian should only marry once.
- She says she is not suited to chastity and will always choose to marry to lead a life full of sexual activity
- The pardoner interrupts her, claiming that he was about to marry but she has frightened him off.
- She brushes him aside.
- She begins telling of her husbands. She lumps the first three together, saying they were 'goode' because they were rich and old, but they were sexually inadequate
- She shows delight in explaining how she talked to them and fooled them
- Her fourth was a 'badde' husband because he had a mistress, but mainly because he was not under her control.
- She revenges him by making him jealous. He dies and she is dismissive of him.
- Her fifth, Jankin, is married because of love.
- He turns out to be a misogynist and takes pleasure in reading to her from a book of anti-feminist writings.
- She becomes exasperated and hits him
- He retaliates but is instantly remorseful
- This allows the Wife to gain complete control and she forces him to burn his book
- Thereafter they lived happily.
- The Friar comments
- The Wife then turns to the form of a fairy-tale for her actual tale.
- The theme is the same; plight between men and women and who will be dominant in a relationship
- The tale is set in the days of King Arthur.
- One of his knights rapes a young woman.
- As a punishment he is set the task to discover 'what thing is it that women moost desiren'.
- He travels around and eventually encounters an old hag who promises him the answer if he promises to fulfil her next demand.
- The answer is revealed to be that women most desire sovereignty (dominance over men)
- The hag's demand is that the knight marries her
- He reluctantly does so. Once he places himself in her power, she is magically transformed into a beautiful woman and they live happily ever after.