

THE GENERAL PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES -notes

- The Canterbury tales is set in April – it's significantly set in spring as it's associated with new generations and re-birth and dormant spirituality being reawakened. It was also logical to be set in spring as it would make sense weather-wise.
- The pilgrims are joined together by chance and all they have in common is that they're all going on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. They came from different social and economic backgrounds and thus had different viewpoints about different aspects of life.
- The General Prologue to the tales, explains how Chaucer found himself, one April day, in the company of a group of pilgrims, riding from London to Canterbury. They would all tell stories and on return to London, the teller of the best story (as judged by the Host) will win a free meal, paid for by the rest.
- The Wife's tale is the sixth tale (of 24, including 2 by Chaucer) [this is in some editions of the tale, others it's the fourteenth]. Her tale precedes the Friar's and the Summoner's. In one edition she follows the Cook while in others she follows the Pardoner. Her tale is the first in the "marriage group" tales

THE WIFE 'S CHARACTER:

- Here Chaucer introduces hints he intends to amplify later in the narrative.
- In the wife of bath it is tempting to see an early feminist
- She is a bold, outspoken woman. Already old for those times. She has married often and is the only female character (apart from the Prioress) to be described in detail.
- She suffers from slight deafness and we learn later on that it was a result from being hit by Jankin.
- Being gap-toothed is seen as an indication of sexual energy
- She was good at weaving and cloth-making.
- In Chaucer's time there were strict codes of hierarchical groups which determined what you could do and who you could speak to. She says no other woman would go before her to the offertory in the church – nobody would dare to as the Wife would be extremely annoyed if they did so.
- She is wearing red stockings – red is synonymous with passion and lust. Red implies a certain level of self-confidence as it is a bold colour. In Chaucer's time clothes were not usually that colourful but the rich wore brighter colours – this adds to the idea that she is relatively wealthy and bold.
- We definitely get the idea that she is a wealthy woman.
- As the Wife later explains, she was born under an astrological combination (and people in those days were very superstitious and believed in the influence of astrology on personality) of Mars and Venus. Mars was the Roman God of War and was associated with masculinity. Venus was the Goddess of Beauty and was associated with beauty. If the wife was born under Mars and Venus, it tells us she will have an amalgamation of masculine and feminine features.
- The Canterbury tales was written as a satirical writing to criticise through the use of humour or praise and Chaucer is hinting that the wife is not as respectable as we think through the sarcastic tone.

- She'd been to Jerusalem three times and this was the most important pilgrimage a Christian could go on. This tells us that she was physically fit, she is relatively religious, she is wealthy and she has gone on them when she was married showing she was in control of her marriages. She is not the typical medieval woman.
- Her habit of going on pilgrimages suggests a devout woman, but her real reasons are a love of adventure and the social opportunities these trips bring.
- She tells a story whose moral appears to be that women, in their affairs with men, prefer above all things to be in charge. Yet she herself is capable of falling for a husband who is handsome, even though he treats her badly once they are married.
- In her very long introduction to her tale, she explains how she married old men, got them to give her their money and then wore them out by a mixture of nagging and sexual demands.
- She is thus quite rich and independent. She has travelled widely and obviously loves travelling for the society it provides her with.
- She is also wearing a hat which she compares to a shield - a shield is more of a masculine type of comparison.
- She has large hips usually associated with child-bearing.
- The fact that she is wearing spurs, coupled with the comparison of the hat to the shield, emphasizes her masculine traits and her domineering character.

THE WIFE:

