

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



Instead of beginning her tale, the Wife continues to discuss her own life. She says she had three good husbands—old, rich men—and two bad ones. She describes married life with the three 'good' men.

As evere moote I drinken wyn or ale,
 I shal seye sooth, tho housbondes that I hadde, 195
 As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.
 The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;
 Unnethe mighte they the statut holde
 In which that they were bounden unto me.
 Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee. 200
 As help me God, I laughe whan I thinke
 How pitously a-night I made hem swinke!
 And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.
 They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
 Me neded nat do lenger diligence 205
 To winne hir love, or doon hem reverence.
 They loved me so wel, by God above,
 That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love.
 A wys womman wol bisie hire evere in oon
 To gete hir love, ye, ther as she hath noon. 210
 But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
 And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
 What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
 But it were for my profit and myn ese?
 I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey, 215
 That many a night they songen "weilaway!"
 The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,
 That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe.
 I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
 That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe 220
 To bringe me gaye thinges fro the faire.
 They were ful glad whan I spak to hem faire;
 For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously.



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In the long section in lines 235–378, Chaucer gives the Wife a list of actions and statements that illuminate traditional and stereotypical areas of disagreement between men and women. Every stand-up comedian from the fourteenth century onwards has probably used some of this material in their routine. Why does Chaucer include it here? At the end of the section (line 382) the Wife turns to her audience of pilgrims, telling them that her poor old husbands never said any of these things at all, she merely pretended that they said them. So what has Chaucer gained by putting it all in?

- Discuss this with a partner first, and then in a larger group. Consider two things: how this passage adds to our understanding of the Wife herself; and also what it adds to the whole question of male–female relationships that Chaucer scrutinizes in this prologue and tale.

Line 246 offers the opportunity for some character acting in pairs. The husband comes home 'as drunk as a mouse' (Why a mouse? Does this give an idea of his personality or did mice often fall into beer vats?) and begins to 'preach' to his wife. Presumably she has a great deal to say in return.

- With a partner; work on a piece of similar dialogue between a modern man and wife. Do people still argue about the same issues as those in Chaucer's text?

224	hou I baar me proprely how cleverly I handled things	235	Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array? so, master; you old fool, is this the way you carry on?
226	shulde should bere hem wrong on honde trick them, deceive them	236	so gay so well-dressed
230	hem misavise get themselves into trouble	238	no thrifty clooth not a thing to wear
231–4	A wys wyf shal . . . Of hir assent [A well-known story of the time concerned a talking bird, a chough ('cow'), which told its master when his wife entertained her lover in her husband's absence. She said the bird was mad, but he refused to believe her. The next night the wife and her maid made noises like a thunderstorm over the bird's cage. On hearing the bird complain of the terrible storm, the man decided that the bird had lost its senses, and dismissed the tale of the visiting lover.]	239	dostow what do you do?
		240	artow are you?
		241	rowne whisper
			Benedicite! God bless us!
		242	lat thy japes be stop this messing about
		244	Withouten gilt quite innocently
		247	with ivel preef bad luck to you
		249	costage expense
		250	heigh parage noble birth
		254	holour lecher

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The Wife offers advice to all women on how to 'keep men under control'. She suggests leaping into the attack first, and accusing them of unacceptable behaviour before they have the opportunity to begin making their own criticisms.

Now herkneþ hou I baar me proprely,
 Ye wise wives, that kan understonde. 225
 Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde;
 For half so boldely kan ther no man
 Swere and lyen, as a womman kan.
 I sey nat this by wives that been wise,
 But if it be whan they hem misavise. 230
 A wys wyf shal, if that she kan hir good,
 Bere him on honde that the cow is wood,
 And take witesse of hir owene maide
 Of hir assent; but herkneþ how I saide:
 “Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array? 235
 Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?
 She is honoured over al ther she gooth;
 I sitte at hoom, I have no thrifty clooth.
 What dostow at my neighebores hous?
 Is she so fair? artow so amorous? 240
 What rowne ye with oure maide? *Benedicite!*
 Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be.
 And if I have a gossib or a freend,
 Withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend,
 If that I walke or pleye unto his hous. 245
 Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous,
 And prechest on thy bench, with ivel preef!
 Thou seist to me it is a greet meschief
 To wedde a povre womman, for costage;
 And if that she be riche, of heigh parage, 250
 Thanne seistow that it is a tormentrie
 To soffre hire pride and hire malencolie.
 And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,
 Thou seist that every holour wol hire have;
 She may no while in chastitee abide, 255
 That is assailed upon ech a side.



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One of Chaucer's other pilgrims (the Merchant) tells a tale about a man who has very precise specifications by which to choose his ideal bride.

- Using the information on this page and the preceding one, create an advertisement for the ideal wife. Alternatively, write your own specification for an ideal partner of either sex, and include, as Chaucer does, both those things that would be attractive and those faults or features you would not wish to find.

The man supposedly speaking in this passage likens some women to spaniels and others to grey geese. What particular qualities of each of these creatures is he considering?

- Write a description of a man or a woman in which you liken them to one or several creatures, making clear where the likeness appears.
- Alternatively, try your hand at producing a cartoon likeness of one of the characters mentioned by Chaucer on this page.

259	for she kan because she knows how to		something that no man would willingly keep possession of
260	daliaunce flirtation	273	lorel wretch or miserable toad [an insulting word]
261	hir handes and hir armes smale slender hands and arms [signs of great beauty in the 1300s]	275	entendeth unto hopes to reach
263–4	Thou seist men . . . been overal men cannot defend a wife's virtue [literally: a castle wall] forever—if it is under constant attack it will finally be taken	276–7	With wilde . . . be tobroke! with wild thunderclaps and flashing lightning may your scraggy old neck be broken [The Wife seems to be working herself into a frenzy.]
265	foul ugly	278–80	Thow seist . . . owene hous [The Wife is here quoting from St Jerome's adaptation of words from Proverbs 27:12.]
266	Coveiteth fancies	281	What eyleth . . . chide? What's wrong with an old man that he complains so much?
267	him [not just one man: all of them]	283	fast safely married
269–70	Ne noon so grey . . . withoute make there's no goose so grey [unattractive] on the lake, so you say, that she can't find a partner somewhere	284	Wel may . . . of a shrewe! that's the sort of thing a misery like you would say
271–2	And seist . . . his thanks, helde it's difficult to keep under control		

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The Wife presents a catalogue of the reasons men have for marrying, mingled with the reasons men have to complain about their wives. Lack of sexual restraint figures largely in this list.

Thou seist som folk desiren us for richesse,
 Somme for oure shap, and somme for oure fairnesse,
 And som for she kan outhere singe or daunce,
 And som for gentillesse and daliaunce; 260
 Som for hir handes and hir armes smale:
 Thus goth al to the devel, by thy tale.
 Thou seist men may nat kepe a castel wal,
 It may so longe assailed been overal.
 And if that she be foul, thou seist that she 265
 Coveiteth every man that she may se,
 For as a spaynel she wol on him lepe,
 Til that she finde som man hire to chepe.
 Ne noon so grey goos gooth ther in the lake
 As, seistow, wol been withoute make. 270
 And seist it is an hard thing for to welde
 A thing that no man wole, his thanks, helde.
 Thus seistow, lorel, whan thow goost to bedde;
 And that no wys man nedeth for to wedde,
 Ne no man that entendeth unto hevене. 275
 With wilde thonder-dint and firy levене
 Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!
 Thow seist that dropping houses, and eek smoke,
 And chiding wives maken men to flee
 Out of hir owene hous; a, *benedicitee!* 280
 What eyleth swich an old man for to chide?
 Thow seist we wives wol oure vices hide
 Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe—
 Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrew!

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Chaucer's source for the list of complaints in lines 235–315 is St Jerome's treatise condemning Jovinian's support of marriage, which itself is derived from the writings of the philosopher Theophrastus (see note on line 671). Scholarly material and domestic trivialities are skilfully amalgamated, here and elsewhere.

- There are a number of complaints made in these lines both about the husband's behaviour and about the wife's. Do you consider any, or all, of them to be justified in any way? Although it has already been mentioned that she finally says the old husbands never said any of these things, are things mentioned here which seem likely to be a true commentary on the Wife's married life?
- What suggests to you from both the subject matter and the style of this page that the Wife is growing increasingly angry as she recalls life with her 'good' husbands?
- Is it possible to discern from what you have read so far the qualities of life the Wife values most? What would her modern equivalent be like? After discussion, write a magazine article along the lines of 'My perfect life - an interview with the Wife of Bath'.



▲ 'Why hidestow, with sorwe, The keys of thy cheste away fro me?'

- 286 **They been assayed . . . stoundes** they can be tested/tried out on various occasions,
- 287 **Bacins, lavours . . .** bowls, washbasins
- 288 **housbondrie** houseware
- 295 **but thou . . . upon my face** unless you gaze lovingly at my face all the time
- 298 **make me fressh and gay** buy me fine new clothes to wear
- 299 **norice** nurse
- 300 **chamberere** chambermaid
- 301 **fadres folk and his allies** father's folk and relations
- 304 **crispe heer** curly hair
- 305 **squiereth me** keeps me company wherever I go
- 307 **I wol him noght** I wouldn't have him [but she does!]
- 308 **with sorwe** curse you
- 309 **cheste** sturdy, well-padded box
- 311 **wenestow** are you trying to
- 312–15 **Now by that lord . . . maugree thine yen** I now swear by St James of Compostela you shall not have both my body and my possessions under your control. You'll have to give up one of the two, damn your eyes.
- 316 **helpith it** good does it do
- 317 **I trowe thou woldest** I think you'd like to
chiste chest

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We are told the angry husband says all other household stock and animals can be tried out before buying, but no one can test out a wife before marriage. He says she is angry if he fails to speak graciously to her, her family, friends and servant. He suspects (apparently falsely) her fondness for Jankin, the fair-haired apprentice. To her fury, her husband will not relinquish the keys to the money chest.

Thou seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,	285
They been assayed at diverse stoundes;	
Bacins, lavours, er that men hem bye,	
Spoons and stooles, and al swich housbondrie,	
And so been pottes, clothes, and array;	
But folk of wives maken noon assay,	290
Til they be wedded; olde dotard shrew!	
And thanne, seistow, we wol oure vices shewe.	
Thou seist also that it displeth me	
But if that thou wolt preyse my beautee,	
And but thou poure alwey upon my face,	295
And clepe me 'faire dame' in every place.	
And but thou make a feeste on thilke day	
That I was born, and make me fressh and gay;	
And but thou do to my norice honour,	
And to my chamberere withinne my bour,	300
And to my fadres folk and his allies-	
Thou seistow, olde barel-ful of lies!	
And yet of oure apprentice Janekin,	
For his crispe heer, shinging as gold so fyn,	
And for he squiereth me bothe up and doun,	305
Yet hastow caught a fals suspecion.	
I wol him noght, thogh thou were deed tomorwe!	
But tel me this: why hidestow, with sorwe,	
The keys of thy cheste away fro me?	
It is my good as wel as thyn, pardee!	310
What, wenestow make an idiot of oure dame?	
Now by that lord that called is Seint Jame,	
Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood,	
Be maister of my body and of my good;	
That oon thou shalt forgo, maugree thine yen.	315
What helpith it of me to enquere or spyen?	
I trowe thou woldest loke me in thy chiste!	



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In line 322 the Wife asserts that women need to be given their freedom. Freedom to do what? There have been a number of hints and some direct statements already of the sort of behaviour she is thinking of here. How strongly do the statements she makes on this page seem to contradict her declarations of virtue elsewhere?

- Find examples of her claims to virtue. Do you approve of her moral standpoint? Does Chaucer?

319	Taak youre . . . leve no talis enjoy yourself I will not believe any gossip about you	332	queynte a woman's sexual parts
322	we wol ben at oure large we wish to have total freedom	333–6	He is to greet . . . nat pleyne thee anyone who complains if another man borrows his lantern to light a candle is far too much of a miser: By God it doesn't interfere with the amount of light he enjoys himself. You have as much as you want [to her old husband], so stop moaning.
324	astrologien astrologer Daun Ptholome [Ptolemy, whose book on astronomy, the 'Almageste', was much respected in the fourteenth century—see note to lines 182–3].	339	peril of a danger to
326–30	Of alle men . . . that othere folkes fare? the wisest man is he who never bothers who else might own all the riches of the world. In other words, if you have sufficient for yourself, why make a fuss about what other folk might be enjoying?	341	the Apostles name [refers to Paul's first letter to Timothy 2:9]
		344	tressed heer and gay perree braided hair and fine gems
		346–7	After thy text . . . as a gnat I don't care a fly for your biblical text, nor for the way you interpret it

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The Wife imagines a happy state in which she is given complete freedom to do whatever she wishes by a trusting husband. Women can't bear to be restrained, she says. The philosopher Ptolemy said that miserable people always envy what others possess. After all, if her old husband is able to enjoy sex with her whenever he wants it, why should he begrudge others her favours, she asks. She has no patience with his complaint that fine clothes are an indication of a woman's lack of chastity and self-control.

Thou sholdest seye, 'Wyf go wher thee list;
 Taak youre disport, I wol nat leve no talis.
 I knowe yow for a trewe wyf dame Alis.' 320
 We love no man that taketh kep or charge
 Wher that we goon; we wol ben at oure large.
 Of alle men yblessed moot he be,
 The wise astrologien, Daun Ptholorne,
 That seith this proverbe in his Almageste: 325
 'Of alle men his wisdom is the hyeste
 That rekketh nevere who hath the world in honde.'
 By this proverbe thou shalt understonde,
 Have thou ynogh, what thar thee recche or care
 How mirily that othere folkes fare? 330
 For, certeyn, olde dotard, by youre leve,
 Ye shul have queynte right ynogh at eve.
 He is to greet a nigard that wolde werne
 A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
 He shal have never the lasse light, pardee. 335
 Have thou ynogh, thee thar nat pleyne thee.
 Thou seist also, that if we make us gay
 With clothing, and with precious array,
 That it is peril of oure chastitee;
 And yet, with sorwe! thou most enforce thee, 340
 And seye thise wordes in the Apostles name:
 'In habit maad with chastitee and shame
 Ye wommen shul apparaille yow,' quod he,
 'And noght in tressed heer and gay perree,
 As perles, ne with gold, ne clothes riche.' 345
 After thy text, ne after thy rubriche,
 I wol nat wirche as muchel as a gnat.



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- Presumably the list of sayings that the Wife reels off in these lines would have been familiar to her audience: 'Give a woman a new dress and she'll be off on the tiles just like any cat', and so on. Make a list of the sayings she mentions here, then, with a partner; make up a few of your own—perhaps about husbands for a change.

353–4 **But forth . . . a-caterwawed** but off she'll go before daybreak, to show her fine clothes and to have a good time

356 **my borel** ['Borel' was actually rather rough, coarse cloth. The Wife may be speaking sarcastically; she has already referred to the meanness of husbands who don't provide new clothes readily.]

358–60 **Argus with his hundred yen . . . but me lest** [Argus was a mythical hundred-eyed creature. The Wife is saying that even if this creature were her guardian, she would still break free, if she wished.]

361 **make his berd** outwit him

362 **so moot I thee!** I can tell you! or I promise you!

364 **the ferthe** the fourth

367 **Yrekened is** is reckoned to be

368–370 **Been ther none . . . be oon of tho?** are there no other comparisons that you could use for your parables? Do you have to keep comparing dreadful things to poor innocent wives?

371 **Thou liknest** you compare

374 **brenneth** burns

376–7 **right as wormes . . . hire housbonde** just as insects can destroy a tree, so a woman can destroy her husband



◀ 'And if the cattes skin be slik and gay, She wol nat dwelle in house half a day.'