
UNIT 2 CHAUCER: *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In unit 2 of the present block, we gained a view of Chaucer's life and works that covered the fourteenth century English society and culture as well as the poems Chaucer wrote under various heads. In this unit, we study a part of Chaucer's text. It is called *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. This forms part of *The Canterbury Tales* at the point where the Wife of Bath has a chance to tell the fellow pilgrims her tale; her purpose is to entertain the audience and interact with them directly, too. This means that she could address the pilgrims, share with them details about her personal life and link these with the tale. We necessarily think about the *Prologue* here, an introductory piece that may add to the jovial atmosphere in which the tour to Canterbury is conducted. We shall also go into the nature of the *Prologue* as form, its role and function in the telling of the tale so that knowledge is earned about the Wife of Bath as a person and her attitude to the society she lived in. It is of interest for us that the Wife of Bath carries in her a story, and an autobiography. The latter is not less meaningful and valuable than the tale the Wife would present. Her views about men and women of the day and the relationship they have with one another might tickle our imagination and compel us to think about the ideological implications of her conduct.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will help us understand the meaning and message of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, that part of *The Canterbury Tales* where the woman in question is presented in realistic terms. In the words of Muriel Bowden, the woman is described as follows:

The Wife of Bath's orderly and well set-up appearance, as has been suggested, is in keeping with the strong directness of her character. She is one who has always known exactly what she wants and exactly how to get it. she desires, and has obtained importance in her community; good times with gay companions—"In felawshipewelkoude she laughe and carpe" (Bowden, Muriel. "The Good Wife of Juxta Bathon" in *Critics on Chaucer: Readings in Literary Criticism*. Ed Shiela Sullivan New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, rpt. 1994. I. 474).

This is a one line expression of her character and attitude. In the specific *Prologue* preceding her tale, this is clearly reflected. Her manner of speech, the way she addresses her companions and articulates her view of the surrounding world defines her person overall. Jovial and sociable by nature, the Wife creates an ambience of spontaneity and flow where guards are down and the entire crowd of pilgrims would respond to her tale with empathy. They might hold an opinion different from that of her, but they would quite openly consider her opinion for what it is. For the critic, Muriel Bowden, her characterization at the hands of Chaucer in the *General Prologue* also constitutes “a wide variety of love affairs; and, as we shall hear, the excitements and pleasures of travel. *The Wife of Bath* leads a systematized life for all its florid quality, and so her bold countenance, “reed of hewe”, escapes being blowzy and is attractive in its vigour.” (99).

As a literary device, *The Prologue* as such, whether *General Prologue* or *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, plays the important role of connecting with the audience. Indeed, the word stands for introducing the text. The word became quite popular in English writing after Chaucer employed it in *The Canterbury Tales*. In Chaucer's poem, the audience consists of the travellers going on a pilgrimage. Keep also in mind the word holy land to which the pilgrims are proceeding. How it is a pilgrimage, how the members of the travelling group pilgrims and how the destination holy land or a place where the travellers would pay homage is well laid out by the poet under a plan. Chaucer uses in an effective manner his famous irony at many places in the text. This is to entertain the reader as also to tell her/ him that one should remain alert about the way the world goes. This will connect us well with descriptions in *Wife of Bath's Prologue* that we shall take up at length in the following account.

2.2 THE WOMAN QUESTION: RAMIFICATIONS

In the case of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer had decided to keep the tale in the background and put in front the spectacle of English society—the way the society conducted itself and interpreted its institutions. In Chaucer's text, the question is of the woman negotiating her life's path and the institution of marriage. In England of the time, women would be at the receiving end of male oppression and be treated as slaves, without any rights. Her functionality was in focus, not her inner worth. Males used their economic might to keep her in check. It was a male-dominated world.

Aware of this state of affairs, Chaucer has picked up for depiction in this tale a woman of great strength, vitality and aggression. Further, she is outspoken. This went against the norms of the time. We might particularly identify the rural background from which this woman comes. Fashionable and conscious in her own way, she carries a special aura. It is difficult to fiddle with her. She mixes up with the male folk as their equal in all respects. First, she has come to join this group of her own accord from the village Bath where she has a house of her own. She rides a horse with as much skill as a male would. In social conversation, too, she leads most of the time. She is also good at repartee. When it comes to elaborating a point, she can spin a web of words where arguing and counter-arguing are her forte. Enabled by these, she establishes a rapport with the fellow travellers and helps the whole company see the power of her social standpoint. It goes to the credit of Chaucer that she is given a whole length of representation as not merely a teller of a tale but one who essayed a comprehensive approach to life.

2.3 DRAMATIC NATURE OF *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE*

While discussing the dramatic nature of Chaucer's art, we may refer to a comment made by Nevill Coghill. It goes as follows:

Chaucer seems to describe [one specific character] with the same, smooth, objective but friendly appraisal that he had bestowed upon the other pilgrims: there is no show of disfavour. He even seems to admire them for being so perfect of their kind, as a naturalist might admire a cobra, the finest in his collection. No doubt he took immense pleasure in creating them and his ironical flatteries of them seem a kind of payment for this pleasure. (Bowden, Murrel. “The Good Wife of Juxta Bathon” in Sullivan 15)

What stands out in this quotation is “friendly appraisal” that indicates the author putting himself in the shoes of the character. Indeed, this might heighten the irony yet further since the reader would always be aware of the gap between what the author stood for and the overall frame of the composition. Note that being a friend and appraising someone are two different things, but the subtle balance maintained between the two tells its own story.

The format of the *Prologue* is of dramatic presentation. We have in front of us a character addressing an audience. We have before us a woman in flesh and blood who has seen ups and downs of life. This has made her forthright. There is an air of indifference about her. Interestingly, she would touch upon topics of general interest. The significant part of her role in the narrative of *The Canterbury Tales* is that she has a history of her own. This lends authenticity to whatever she would speak. The account she shares with the rest of the company is at the same time personal. Thus, the woman described as Wife of Bath is in the mode of an arguer and a committed person who will prove the strength of her case emphatically. Is it then an address, a confession, an assertion meant to win sympathy or support of the gathering?

The *Prologue* is not merely a link between the part preceding it and the one following it. The writer is not in a hurry to see her as a narrator, as a person carrying out a job assigned to her. The *Prologue* has an independence that enables it to become an episode that would fit in broadly with *The Canterbury Tales*. There are aesthetic characteristics in it that give it the look of a new genre. We may call it an essay on a topic.

2.3.1 The Wife in the Role of Teller of the Tale

The *Prologue* starts with a general comment from the Wife Alison. The beginning mentions the subject of marriage—that would be focus of her attention, and on it she would build an edifice of theory. Yet, the theory is not of abstract variety. Instead, it is based on what she calls experience. Quite precisely, she refers to her consciously-lived life that began at the age of twelve years when her first marriage happened. This, she says, was followed by four more marriages, one after another. Soon, she invokes religion to say that no precise number of marriages was recommended to a woman by the religious dictum. Was it four, or five? She brings in God to iterate that all that society believes in or sanctions with respect to the precise number of a woman’s marriages or husbands is its own doing, not God’s. In her opinion, how marriages happen or the number of times they happen follows the decision of humans. As she goes further in elaborating the idea, “King Solomon, the wise king” is mentioned to have more wives than the supposedly prescribed number of wives. Her statement made tongue-in-cheek is—“Lo, here, the wise king, daun Salomon;/ I trowe he hadde wives mo than oon” (And hear this, how about Lord Solomon, the wise king; I believe that he had more wives than just one!”).

2.3.2 The Wife Characterized

The Wife talks about high qualities and “frailties” in humans. The context is of marriage, virginity, purity and self-control. These may be looked at from two angles. One is of being a strict adherent of morality in life’s affairs, whereas the second is of being lax, having weaknesses of the flesh, for instance. She is supportive of the latter. In her opinion, as she says,

*I graunte it wel, I have noon envie,
Thogh maidenhead preferebigamie.
It liketh hem to be clene, body and goost;
Of mynestaat I nil nat make no boost,
For ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,
He nathnat every vessel al of gold;
Somme been of tree, and doonhir lord servise.
God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wise,*

*And everich hath of God a propreyifte,
Som this, som that, as him likethshifte. (95-104)*

Mark these lines to decipher the message they contain. The Wife is no preacher, nor a pure person in her conduct. In fact, she is not a Christian observing rules of piety even as she believes in God, Christ and the Apostles. Her words are right and the practice is clearly faulty. But Chaucer has put in her mouth the central truth of human life. This passage presents the core of Chaucer's wisdom and understanding. It expresses that doctrine of humanism Chaucer is famous for. After admitting that she does not meet the high standards of righteousness, she asserts in her own inimitable manner the variety and diversity of men's and women's actions. The metaphor used to convey this is of a lord's household that has not all pots and pans of gold but those made of other metals coexisting with the golden ones. To her mind, different kinds of vessels serve a useful purpose and prove their utility to the household. The metaphor is cleverly combined with the humanity on planet Earth where every individual human being possesses this or that "*propreyifte*" (proper gift or quality) given to him/her by God following His "pleasure." In God's eyes, there is no strict hierarchy of importance among his creations. See Chaucer's linguistic precision: "*And everich hath of God a propreyifte,/ Som this, som that, as him likethshifte*" (103-4).

2.3.3 The Wife as an Interpreter

The Wife has her own way of interpreting God's message, full of wit and courage. The twists and turns in her comment impress us as, for instance, her announcement that she as a human being is not duty-bound to follow God's words. Instead, she would observe the high principles in their breach, not observance. Further, she would use her energies for the fulfilment of pleasures (of flesh) afforded by marriage. To quote: "*I wol bestowe the flour of al myn age/ In the actes and in fruit of mariage*" (113-4). Here, "*flour*" signifies flower and "*actes*" acts. We might particularly comprehend the construction "*fruit of mariage*" that points towards joys of intimacy between man and woman. Chaucer's choice of words is exemplary, a method and vision that links him with life's realities in the surrounding world. She is aware that social codes and norms are human-made and serve the ends of living at levels of body and mind. This works at variance with supposed virtues of piety and chastity. The Wife of Bath is the woman of the world.

Does the Wife not think too high of herself? She is energetic and confident. Her way of reading the norms of the time is based on her interests, not of the society to which she belongs to. The Pardoner among the audience does not feel comfortable when she has spoken words denoting independence of her will. He would rather that he delayed his own marriage till another year. His announcement both amuses and alerts the audience. It goes as follows:

*I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas,
What shold I bye it on my flesh so deere?
Yet hadde I leverewedde no wyf to-yeere!*

Her comment has a tone of teasing and a clear disagreement. We see that the Wife is not cowed down by Pardoner's mild censure. She argues her case and at the end says that she did not intend to hurt anyone but only to put forth her view.

The Wife's account of her marriages is interesting. To her, the first three marriages got her money and lands, and the husbands possessed wealth for which she married them. The hint is that she did not mind the age-gap since her eye was on their resources. Also, she treated them "cruelly" since she had the upper hand, being younger than them. She handled the three husbands cleverly, keeping them on toes. She would accuse them for ogling the younger women in the neighbourhood and go her own way when it suited her. Such a revelation of her talking skills lets the audience know that as a woman she was doubly as successful in terrifying men as they would be in bullying women. Consider the following dialogue rendered in modern English:

“You say that oxen, asses, horses and hounds are tested many times, and the same is the case with basins and pots that men buy. This applies as well to spoons and stools, etc.—the items in use at home. Think the same way about utensils, clothes and tapestry. Why not are the women tested the same way till they enter wedlock? You old fool! Then only, you say, we come out in our true colours.

“Further, you remark that I am angry since you did not admire my looks, did not call me “charming lady” and all that, such as you were made to spend so much money on my birthday, got me good dresses, respected my maids and put up bravely with my father’s relatives and acquaintances. Thou haggard, outdated barrelful of lies!”

With help from this rendering, have a look at Chaucer’s original lines, using sounds in the English of his time, so evocative and tongue-in-cheek:

*“Thou seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,
They been assayed at diverse stoundes;
Bacins, laours, er that men hem bye,
Spoones and stooles, and al swichhousboundre,
And so been pottes, clothes, and array;
But folk of wives maken noon assay,
Til they be wedded; olde dotard shrewe!*

*“Thou seist also that it displeseth me
But if that thou woltpreyse my beautee,
And but thou pourealwey upon my face,
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 chambererewithinne my bour,
And to my fadres folk and his allies—
Thus seistow, old barel-ful of lies! (285-302)*

2.4 THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE FROM POINT OF VIEW OF FORM

Let us consider this part of the *Prologue* from the point of view of form. As representation of the character of Wife of Bath, it presents the trend of how a person is imagined and projected in literature. This was something new in the literature of the time, with no tradition of story-telling or dramatizing in the established sense. The important thing is the dynamic idea of a human being, the way one handles the self and the way s/he is interpreted by the reader. The trend assumed a distinct shape with time and reached its zenith in Shakespeare’s drama more than two hundred years later.

2.4.1 The Character Imagined as Individual

In Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, the Wife is imagined as an individual who understands her world concretely. Her analysis is steeped in a deeply understood reality of the time. With respect to the conduct of husbands, she has a great deal of wisdom to convey. Are husbands masters of the household, or who run its affairs together with their wives? The questions raised in the text relate to social rights. For the Wife, women in matrimony are held on a tight leash. She points out that women are compared with items of use in the home. The custom is that they are supposed to be tested the same way as vegetables, or pots and pans. If money was spent on the wife’s upkeep, it is for making the man respectable. The complaint of the Wife is serious even as she makes it dramatic. There is a double irony in this—the point made by the woman is serious and the passion with which she argues makes it laughable. She quite clearly plays to the gallery. Finally, who is scoring the critical point that women should be treated as an

entertaining nuisance? The reference to the young Jankin who has “crispe” hair “shininge as gold so fyn” introduces the element of jealousy the husband may harbour that he wins the Wife’s attention more.

2.4.2 Idea of Type as Built into the *Prologue*

We note that in the *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, Alison fights against the gender difference strongly. She has been targeted as a woman all her life. She invited criticism for not being a true wife. In relation to the husband, she always found herself helpless. Whether it was money, land or privilege, she had to work extra and use tricks and stratagem for ensuring gain. None appreciated her quality of mind or ability to mobilize opinion. There is no reference in the text to her personal skills. If she expresses an opinion, people interpret it as an affront. Consider that in the company of pilgrims, people hear her talk only for amusement, not listen to her for any gain or benefit. This invisible prejudice rattles her, makes her feel uneasy and insecure. This results in her being worked up in the middle of her introductory remarks. One reason why her Prologue is so long, unlike those of other characters is that no one takes her seriously. This is not merely the case in the Prologue but would have been in life as well. This absence of individuality is a part of Chaucer’s realism. It is suggested that women particularly got their identity from marriage or family, seldom from strength of qualities and skills.

2.5 THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE AS EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

At this point in the account of Wife of Bath, we may also recognize the interpretive skills of this dynamic personality. Particularly significant in her treatment of the popular opinion is her reference to Ptolemy whom she quotes for elucidating moral assertion. The Greek astronomer is evoked to say that a man should be good at one’s own work than keeping an eye on what others are doing. This amounts to focusing upon one’s affairs with ability. Dame Alice gives it a comic twist to argue that the husband should devote his time to his wife, give her happiness and not cross boundary to curtail her freedom. There is a direct link here between her freedom to move around in the neighbourhood for seeking pleasure and men’s right to mix with other women. The humour in the tale gets a boost since the husband or husbands she talks about are of old age and they are not always capable of fulfilling demands of pleasure of the women they married. The hint is that husbands of this variety are suspicious because of their advanced age. At the same time, they keep up the show of vitality by mixing up with as many women of the neighbourhood as possible. For her, husbands carry on their exploits by dint of money and social influence that they enjoy. What should the poor woman do in such a case? Alison raises this question rhetorically and answers it by putting forward the thesis that women have the inherent ability to beat men at their own game. They can do this, says she, by hiding behind their beauty, shiny clothes and tricks not likely to be fathomed by men-folk. One of the effective tricks available to women is launching the counter-attack on men. She repeats the charges men level against women and, thus, becomes the aggrieved party. The dialogue used by men to suppress women is worth quoting. In her attempt, she turns tables on them by addressing them directly. It goes as follows:

*Thou liknest eek wommens love to helle,
To bareynelond, ther water may natdwelle.
Thou liknest it also to wildefyr;
The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir
To consume every thing that brentwole be.
Thou seyest, right as wormesshende a tree,
Right so a wyfdestroyeth hire housbonde;
This knowe they that been to wives bonde. (371-378)*

In modern English, these lines speak of associating women with barren land where no water exists, or conversely with wild fire that the more it spreads in the forest, the more destruction it causes. The question is whether such a comparison is fair. We forget that in the quoted lines, the description has escaped the lips of an actual woman defending her choice of indulgence as a married woman. Instead, we

wake up to the intolerance to which women are subjected in life. See how women appear to the men-folk. From fire, the comparison is extended to the worms eating into a tree. The humour running across the quoted lines alerts us about the Wife threatening her husband.

Alison's relationship with her husbands is transactional—she gives her favours to them only if they met her demands regarding money. She knows how to handle husbands. Her first three husbands served only for making available to her resources and comforts. As husbands, they would have given her tough time, but she was clever-witted and gave them back for their trickery. Her supposed womanly ways stood her in good stead. They were old and she was young. Help came her way through this route. She frankly shares this with the fellow travellers on way to Canterbury. The depiction here reflects upon life in the fourteenth century. Even as types, women identified areas of restriction and control. That these existed makes us conscious about the division between men and women; these worked to the detriment of women. A social phenomenon of this sort would be deeply discouraging for not just women but all those who were placed lower in the hierarchical order. Indirectly, Chaucer places such categories of living under the scanner.

2.6 THE STRUCTURE OF *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE* AND JANKINS, THE FIFTH HUSBAND

2.6.1 Neat Divisions in the Wife's Prologue

The Wife of Bath's Prologue changes thematically in the middle of the account and it portrays Alison from then on as not a domineering person, but one who would be at the receiving end of males. This happens after the death of the third husband. The fourth husband whom she marries is of a different temperament. He keeps relations with other women and cheats on her. She feels agonised. How could she bear such an ignominy? This gives her an occasion to relook her strategy to keep the husbands in check and lord over them. The change in her situation is dramatic. How to cope with such a problem and keep the husband in shackles? At this point, her representation becomes greatly comic since she is compelled to invent ways for harnessing the fourth husband. An extrovert, Alison begins playing a part at this stage. She tells her audience that it became necessary to torture him mentally. For meeting the requirements of the case, she planned to have lovers of her own and praised them for their manliness, appearance and manners. Jealousy was made the weapon to hit the husband with. In full knowledge of the husband, she would visit the lovers. On other occasions, she waited for her husband to leave home. As soon as he left, she would go out to meet one or the other lover. This act of hers instilled a sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the mind of the fourth husband who was reduced to a mental wreck. Such a strain on the fourth husband told on his health and soon he died. Yet, she had run into another lover meanwhile whom she married soon after. His name was Jankins.

2.6.2 The Structure

So far, we have had a view of the Wife's four husbands and the way they were tackled in the relationship. The management of the first four marriages required a perspective and the Wife did ample justice to the issue. This took place at the level of the Prologue's structure, too. What is this structure?

Since the length of Wife of Bath's Prologue is equal to that of *The Canterbury Tales* itself, it is only natural that the question be looked at with attention. Broadly speaking, the Wife's Prologue has three clear markings—the beginning where marriage is interpreted as an institution in terms of theory. In it are brought religion, moral system, philosophy, society and the human species per se. Here, the wife is a kind of philosopher and an analyst.

This is followed by the Wife's account of the first four marriages that were a means for her to extract as much money and land from the spouses as possible. All the husbands who came in her life one after another, the accepted principle being monogamy, were older than her in age and they worked at her behest. The version offered by the Wife tells of the cruel treatment she gave them. This is not to suggest

that the husbands were good people and they did not try to take advantage of her, or exploit her. Their ways were wily, too. It is significant that Chaucer chose not to give them any name—they were first, second, third, or fourth husband. Why? The answer is that they fell under the category of agents of dominance. Thus, they paved the way to socially critiquing matrimony as an instrument of oppression. Such an institution would not allow freedom to a wife. It would compel her, on strength of norms as well as explicit rules to remain obedient and servile. In this specific case, as a part of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the description was a pointer to the existing gender division. The Prologue as it stood, earned weight since the woman narrator based it on her autobiographical details.

The representation of the fifth husband is an entirely different case. With it, the Wife's Prologue comes to an end. It is a sort of conclusion. However, as we see, the 'conclusion' is open-ended, problematic and comic. The husband Jankin is an individual with a name. He is twenty years old whereas Alison is middle-aged. For the first time in her life, she is struck by the emotion of love. She likes the man's company and relates well with him. He is physically stronger than her and can turn violent if he did not like her actions. At one point, he strikes her so hard that she partially loses the sense of hearing. Even as he has his own indulgences. With great difficulty, she bears it all but offers resistance many a time. The constant quarrelling is also because of his quoting a book of norms all the time. That is finally the bone of contention. A serious issue with him is of money that the Wife passes on to him and becomes totally devoid of resources. This renders her helpless. Can she come out of this situation and regain her lost value? Also, if she tried her might in this direction, would she succeed in the aim? These are what she, and the author who created her confront. That makes it an apt ending of an important and notable episode.

2.6.3 Alison and Jankins

In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, these two characters have an individuality that is missing in many others in this part of the text. For instance, they know who they are and what they want. Alison knows that there is a series of experiences behind her. She remembers difficulties, pitfalls and confusions that came her way in her struggle with the four husbands she had at different points of time. She is aware that she no longer has the charm she had as a young woman. In her journey to adulthood, she has mainly faced hurdles; it is a different matter that she came out a winner finally in those struggles. At this moment in the text, Alison and Jankin have the faculty of devising ways to reach their respective goals. Both have a clear sense of assertion. Emotionally, too, they are strongly drawn to each other. Does it mean they are in love? So far as Alison is concerned, this appears to be the case.

Alison is a born lover. Her definition of this emotion is as much at the level of mind as body, and she does not allow shyness or femininity or even fidelity to come near her. A woman of the world with interests in the mundane, she would prefer to be reckless in matters of the senses. Her words in this regard ring true. To quote:

Allas, allas, that evere love was sinne!
I folwed ay myninclinacioun
...
I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
But everefolwedemyn appetite.

(Alas, alas, if ever love could be sinful!
I always obeyed my desire
...
In love I was never guided by mind,
But sought guidance from the urge.)

But when she chose Jankin for husband, she found that she was constantly harassed by him. He did not like her for her wild ways and made it clear to her that she was wicked. He would extend the torture by

reading out those passages from his book, which he always kept by his side, that described only women of evil intentions. This made her hate him even more, as she argued unto her. But one day, she put a stop to his behaviour. Pulling out three pages from his book, she threw them into the fire and Jankin in return hit her violently. She lay almost dead in front of him, seeing which he was alarmed. Gaining consciousness, she had a sharp exchange with him. Reconciliation ensued and Jankin returned to her all the money, lands and other resources, including control over the house. There indeed was some trick behind it and it worked successfully. From then on, the Wife and Jankin lived peacefully and happily till the latter's death. This was happy ending to a Prologue that began with sharp argument, loose talk, advocacy of freedom and irreligiosity in human behaviour and assertion of one who lived by instinct that by morality.

2.6.4 Women, Realism and the World

As we look back to the fourteenth century generally and the life captured in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* specifically, we realise that much depends on the approach of the poet engaging with that period. It is to the credit of the poet Chaucer that in one go, he covered the wide territory of prejudice against women in the fourteenth century England as well as the intellectual repertoire of a woman. The mode used to project the cause was comic, something unthinkable then. The crux was tolerance and patient appreciation of potentialities hidden in human initiative. Chaucer could see that women could survive in difficult conditions, and use them indeed to their advantage. Women were tenacious as well as flexible. They could put social restrictions on the back burner and think of the means to participate in surroundings of hierarchy. Yet, all stood face to face with another agency of vivacity and spontaneity—that being nature from which a lot could be learnt. Poets understood it better than reformers, teachers and men of order. Think of what Virginia Woolf had to say about Chaucer. For her,

Nature, uncompromising, untamed, was no looking glass for happy faces, or confessor of unhappy souls. She was herself; sometimes, therefore, disagreeable enough and plain, but always in Chaucer's pages with the hardness and the freshness of an actual presence. Soon, however, we notice something of greater importance than the gay and picturesque appearance of the medieval world—the solidity which plumps it out, the conviction which animates the characters. Virginia Woolf: "What is This World" in Sullivan, 18)

See to what extent this comment could be applied to the portrayal of the Wife of Bath in the specific context of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

The Wife of Bath's Prologue offers a debate that takes place among the pilgrims on a holy journey to Canterbury. Apparently, the *Prologue* is a speech made by the Wife of Bath. However, she holds conversation through her speech with the fellow travellers and herself. In the exercise, she comes out as a robust person, a woman of the world who enjoys life since she lives it on her terms. During the speech, she makes pertinent points about marriage, being a married woman in a male dominated world, the struggle on the part of an individual to cope with pressures of society, matters of money and property, as well as prejudices that accompany any discourse linked with initiative, privilege, and power. We may also not overlook the link of the *Prologue* with the tale that the Wife of Bath will finally relate to her audience. The crux of the *Prologue* is the assertive and dynamic nature of the woman Alison in fourteenth century England.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. In what sense is *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* dramatic? Explain.
2. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* contains social criticism, particularly with respect to marriage, in a substantial manner. Discuss.

3. The Wife of Bath is a woman of great strength, vitality and aggression. She is a threatening presence in the *Prologue*. Do you agree? Give reasons.

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Bowden, Muriel. "The Good Wife of Juxta Bathon" in *Critics on Chaucer: Readings in Literary Criticism*. Ed Shiela Sullivan New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, rpt. 1994.
2. Coghill, Nevill and Christopher Tolkien. Ed., Int. *Geoffrey Chaucer. The Pardoner's Tale*. New Delhi: OUP, rpt. 1991.
3. Handyside, I.G. Ed., *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. London: Macmillan, 1990. All lines quoted from the text in this unit refer to this edition.



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