

## **The Wife of Bath's Prologue**

**Geoffrey Chaucer**

In her discussion of her fourth and fifth husbands, the Wife of Bath begins to let her true feelings show through her argumentative rhetoric. Her language becomes even less controlled, and she loses her place several times (at line 585, for instance), as she begins to react to her own story, allowing her words to affect her own train of thought. Her sensitivity about her age begins to show through, and, as she reveals psychological depth, she becomes a more realistic, sympathetic, and compelling character.

When the Wife of Bath describes how she fell in love with her fifth husband, despite her pragmatism, she reveals her softer side. She recognizes that he used the same tactics against her as she used against other men, but she cannot stop herself from desiring him. Jankyn even uses one of the satires against women to aggravate her, the kind of satire that the Wife mocked earlier in her Prologue. Despite all this, we can see that Jankyn, though the most aggravating of her husbands, is the only one that she admits she truly loved. Even as she brags about her shameless manipulation of her husbands and claims that her sexual powers can conquer anyone, she retains a deep fondness for the one man she could not control.

The Wife seems to enjoy the act of arguing more than the end of deriving an answer by logic. To explain why clerks (meaning church writers) treat wives so badly, for example, she employs three different arguments. First, she blames the entire religious establishment, claiming that church writings breed hostility toward wives because they were written by men (690–696). Then, she gives an astrological explanation, asserting that the children of Mercury (scholars) and of Venus (lovers) always contradict one another. A third reason she gives is that when clerks grow old, their impotence and decreased virility makes them hostile and slanderous toward wives (705–710).

Twice in her Prologue, the Wife calls attention to her habit of lying—“and al was fals,” she states (382, 582). These statements certainly highlight our awareness of the fact that she’s giving a performance, and they also put her entire life story in question. We are left wondering to what extent we should even believe the “experience” of the Wife of Bath,

and whether she is not, in fact, a mean-spirited satire on Chaucer's part, meant to represent the fickleness of women.