***Wife of Bath* Context – Chaucer England**

**Class and Society**

Since Chaucer sets *The* *Canterbury Tales* at a time of economic transition in England, in which new mercantile and artisan classes are shaking things up for the more traditional "estates" of those who pray, those who fight, and those who work (clerics, nobles, serfs), you can bet that class is going to be a big issue in the *Tales*. It's most important in the portraits of members of these new classes like the Merchant or Tradesmen's. These portraits explore the source of these pilgrims' wealth and the way they (and their families) are dealing with their newfound social status. One of the most important questions this new class raises is what qualifies someone to have a position of power in their community. Is it only wealth, as seems to be the case when these men ascend to important positions in the government, or is something more "noble" required, as traditionalists would have us believe? The contrast between members of the new and traditional social classes allows *The* *Canterbury Tales* to explore this question. (See "Setting" for more on the historical context of the *Tales*.)

* Comment on the Wife of Bath’s rank in society. How do we know this?

**Wealth**

Since *The* *Canterbury Tales* are set in a time of economic transition for medieval society, money and wealth play a very big role here, particularly in the portraits of the pilgrims. We see the things money can buy in the descriptions of the clothes people are wearing, the horses they're on, and the gadgets they've got. And we learn about the ways people can make money in portraits of characters like the Merchant, the Tradesmen, or the Wife of Bath. We also hear a lot about the way characters can steal or cheat their way to money, as the Reeve or Pardoner do. In many of the portraits, we witness the way that skill with money-handling can lead to power, deserved or otherwise, and the way lack of concern for money (the Clerk) can be just as troubling as excessive greed (almost all the other characters). Most often, when the *Tales* talk about money, it's to question the ethics of a particular character's relationship to it, particularly in the case of the religious characters who have taken vows of poverty.

* How does the Wife of Bath display her wealth?

**Time**

The *Canterbury Tales* constantly mark the passing of time. The narrator often tells us exactly what time it was when a particular event occurred, and even the way he (or the Host) arrived at this calculation by coordinating the day of the year with the position of the sun. The Host seems to have a sense of urgency about the tale-telling competition, constantly reminding the pilgrims that time is slipping away from them. When he waxes poetic about time, the Host compares it to a stream that's running quickly, the water never to be regained. Yet, despite this fatalism, or sense of powerlessness, about the passage of time, the poem also suggests that it's possible to avoid what's depressing about lost time by using it well. That's probably the reason the Host is so emphatic that the pilgrims keep on telling those tales. To him, at least, tale-telling is a way of using time well.

**Perception**

Many of the pilgrims in the General Prologue are trying to appear to be something they're not. The Prioress wants to appear to be a courtly dilettante. The Merchant would like people to think he's financially solvent. The narrator helps us see through these deceptions, and they become part of what makes *The Canterbury Tales* funny. Other pilgrims make their living through deception; like the Pardoner, who makes a pretty penny on fake relics, or the Friar, who convinces people he's poor enough to deserve charity. Still other characters portray powerless social groups, like women and the elderly, as particularly likely to engage in deception. This accusation reveals the way people in power can keep that power by calling into question the very words the powerless speak. But perhaps the most important way in which lies and deceit make their appearance in *The Canterbury Tales* is in their association with tale-telling. This raises the question of what makes a story true, and of how the categories of truth and falsehood apply to literature, if at all.

* How does the narrator perceive the Wife of Bath? How do we know this?

**Religion**

Since there are many religious figures in *The Canterbury Tales*, we would expect religion and its attendant subjects to be a common topic, and it is. The biggest question about holiness in the *Tales* is whether outward shows of piety, like those practiced by the Summoner and the Pardoner, are enough to constitute true holiness. This question is not as cut-and-dried as it might appear, since the medieval church endorsed the value of outward, physical shows of piety like the very pilgrimage upon which these characters have embarked. But characters like the Parson and the Plowman suggest that something more might be required for true holiness, and that the "something more" might not be as fussy and complicated as pilgrims like the Prioress, Pardoner, or Summoner would have us believe.

* Is the Wife of Bath a pious woman? How is the Church important to her?