***Wife of Bath* – Context and Language**

**Setting**

Chaucer likely wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in the late 1380s and early 1390s, after his retirement from life as a civil servant, and this is when he sets the action. This was a time of great social upheaval in England. The plague had killed a huge percentage of the population, making way for social mobility that led to class tension. In the past, medieval society had been made up of three "estates," or broad groupings by occupation: military types, religious people (like priests and nuns), and peasants. But now, a new, middle class of artisans and merchants, of which Chaucer was a part, was taking over England. Their concerns and interests, as well as the conflict between their new, more cosmopolitan way of life and the traditional values of the "three estate" society, are behind of a lot of the conflict we see in *The Canterbury Tales.*

Another important social issue at this time was the very lowest class's increased power. Because so many able-bodied workers had died in the Plague, farm workers could now auction off their services to the highest bidder. This meant that these members of society had more power and geographic mobility than ever before. Naturally, the landowners who paid them were unhappy about this, and tried to pass laws restricting these people's movement. The tension between these social groups may have been responsible for the hardening of negative stereotypes about lower-class people, which we see expressed in portraits of people like the Miller and Reeve.

A hugely important part of life in the medieval period was the Church (there was only one Christian church then – Protestants had not yet split from Catholicism). The Christian faith was an integral part of daily life for most people, who believed that their salvation depended upon the Sacraments, like the Eucharist and Confession, that only the Church could provide. But many controversial practices, like the selling of pardons, forgiveness from sins, or the monopoly over religious positions by members of the same powerful families, had become more and more prevalent in the late fourteenth century. In addition, rivalries between priests, who generally stayed in one parish and had their salary paid by the tithes of its members, and friars, who begged for money from the same people, had grown fierce. All of these factors led to various anticlerical stereotypes, or negative assumptions, about many religious figures. *The* *Canterbury Tales* draw upon these stereotypes and controversies in their portrayal of religious figures like the Summoner, Pardoner, and Friar.

To speak more specifically about the setting, *The* *Canterbury Tales* begin in a tavern just outside London. A tavern was one of the few places where a group of people from such varied social classes and occupations might cross paths, allowing the chance meeting of them all that leads to the creation of these pilgrims' fellowship. The same is true of pilgrimage, since members of *all* social classes might undertake a visit to a saints' shrine or holy place at some point in their lives, in hopes of earning forgiveness for their sins. Whether or not they would all travel together, as they do in *The* *Canterbury Tales*, is less certain, but this possibly artificial situation allows the work to explore a huge variety of medieval characters and narrative genres.

**Symbolism of Spring**

The pilgrimage begins in the spring, "whan that Aprill, with his [shoures soote](http://www.librarius.com/gy.htm#shoures%20soote) / The [droghte](http://www.librarius.com/gy.htm#droghte) of March hath perced to the roote" (General Prologue 1 – 2). Since this is the beginning of the poem, and the beginning of the pilgrimage (which itself is the beginning of repentance), it's likely that springtime here is a symbol of beginnings. And the beginning of things is exactly what the poem emphasizes in its description of springtime, talking about how the wind spreads the seeds that peek their heads above the soil as they begin to grow into crops, and how birds begin their mating season.

The poem might start this way in order to remind us how pilgrimages are *also* a start of new beginnings. See, the idea of a pilgrimage is that you start on a journey of repentance, beginning a new life, one free from sin. In the beginning of the poem, then, the springtime is a symbol of the new beginnings and the creation of new lives the pilgrims are about to undertake.

**Narrative Voice**

The character of Chaucer serves as our guide to the action. Sometimes Chaucer narrates like he's really there in the tavern, just meeting these pilgrims for the first time, and we feel like we're right there with him. At other times, though, Chaucer is a narrator who seems to know *way* more than he should. For example, he tells us that, when the Shipman wins a fight, he murders the loser by throwing him overboard, or that the Reeve is stealing from his master. Now is that really something these people would tell Chaucer on first meeting him? And how does Chaucer know so *many* details of the pilgrims' day-to-day lives? At these moments, Chaucer acts much more like an omniscient, or all-knowing, narrator, than one who's *truly* in the heat of the action. The reason for this choice could be that verisimilitude, or making things seem like real life, was not as important to a medieval author as it is to authors today. Instead, the narrator might choose to tell whatever he wants to tell to serve the purposes of characterization.

**Genre**

Although the genre of the individual tales varies, the goal of the frame story is pretty clearly to tickle our funny bones and satirize the quirks of various pilgrims, and social estates. So we get lots of humorous details, like that one about the wart on the Miller's nose, or that gross tidbit about the puss-oozing wound on the Cook's leg. As part of the satire, we get characteristics thought to be typical of particular occupations, but exaggerated hugely. Knights are supposed to fight battles? Well *this* Knight's been at practically every battle ever fought in the past twenty years! Wives are supposed to be lustful (and married)? Well *this* Wife's had *five* husbands, in addition to numerous lovers in her youth! So there you go: comedy and satire. Oh, and since this story is about a group of pilgrims on their way to a shrine in a *quest* for forgiveness, you might also consider this part of the "Quest" genre.

**Tone – Credulous, Ironic**

As a narrator, Chaucer shifts between appearing very naïve (i.e., inexperienced and way too ready to believe whatever anyone tells him) and approaching his subjects with heavy irony, or knowledge about the difference between the way the pilgrims want to appear and the way they actually are. We see this all-believing, or credulous, tone most often when Chaucer praises pilgrims. For example, in his portrait of the Monk, we learn that the Monk believes that he should let "old things" – like his vows of poverty and chastity – pass. Chaucer tells us, "I seyde his opinioun was good / What should he studie and make hymselven woode?" (General Prologue 183 – 184). Chaucer's easy acceptance of the Monk's excuses here make him appear a little naïve as a narrator, and as a character.   On the other hand, in the Prioress's portrait, Chaucer slyly exposes the difference between how the Prioress *wants* to appear (as a high-class lady) and what she actually is (a religious figure trying to appear to be a high-class lady). We should mention here that literary types don't always agree about when Chaucer's being credulous and when he's being ironic. Take that example of credulousness in the Monk's portrait. Well, some people think that there, Chaucer's repetition of the Monk's opinion actually makes it appear ridiculous. Yeah, the tone is pretty complicated. That's what makes it so interesting.

**Style - poetry**

The style of *The Canterbury Tales* is characterized by rhyming couplets. That means that every two lines rhyme with each other. It's also in iambic pentameter (the same style as Shakespeare), meaning that in each line there are ten syllables, and a heavily emphasized (stressed) syllable follows a less emphasized (unstressed) syllable: [dah DAH] [dah DAH] [da DAH] [da DAH] [da DAH]. Each [da DAH] is an iamb, and there are five of them per line.  Chaucer's poetic style can be a little bit difficult because, a lot of the time, he twists his sentences around. As English-speakers, we're used to hearing the subject come first in the sentence, followed by the verb. But Chaucer will often do the opposite. Take the line "Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" (General Prologue 12). The subject, "folk," comes *after* the verb, "longen." Chaucer does this a lot, meaning that sometimes you have to wait until you get to the end of a line before you can really understand what's happening in the sentence. The reason for it is to help him keep his couplets rhyming, but darn does it make the *Tales* hard to read sometimes!