




Geoffrey Chaucer's
The Canterbury Tales

ENGLISH LITERATURE (I) WEEK 6



The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale

- Anti-feminist Tradition


- Lines 1-7

Experience—and no matter what they say
In books—is good enough authority
For me to speak of trouble in marriage.
For ever since I was twelve years of age,
Thanks be to God, I've had no less than five
Husbands at church door—if one may believe
I could be wed so often legally!



Wife of Bath's Defense, Line 9-13,
35-

Certainly it was told me, not long since,
That, seeing Christ had never more than once
Gone to a wedding (Cana, in Galilee)
He taught me by that very precedent
That I ought not be married more than once.



Lines 35-40, 44-45, 68-71, 75-78

“And what about that wise King Solomon:
I take it that he had more wives than one!
Now would to God that I might lawfully
Be solaced half as many times as he!
What a God-given gift that Solomon
Had for his wives!

>>NEXT




Woman as Commodity?

.....
Blessed by God that I have married five!
Here's to the sixth, whenever he turns up.
.....

Where was it He ordained virginity?
No fear, you know as well as I do, that
The Apostle, where he speaks of maidenhood,
Says he has got no firm precept for it.

>>NEXT



.....

Had virginity been the Lord's command,
Marriage would at the same time be condemned.
And surely, if no seed were ever sown,
From what, then, could virginity be grown?



Question 1


- The Wife of Bath could be the first feminist in the English literature. It is baffling that, while she claims to be uneducated, like most medieval women, she is evidently quite learned. She often quotes from books to defend herself and women. Can you explain why she pretends to be uneducated at the beginning?



Lines 101-10

“I grant all this; I’ve no hard feelings if
Maidenhood be set above remarriage.
Purity in body and in heart
May please some—as for me, I make no boast.
For, as you know, no master of a household
Has all of his utensils made of gold;

>>NEXT




Some are of wood, and yet they are of use.
The Lord calls folk to Him in many ways,
And each has his peculiar gift from God,
Some this, some that, even as He thinks good.



Lines 121-30

“And tell me also, what was the intention
In creating organs of generation,
When man was made in so perfect a fashion?
They were not made for nothing, you can bet!
Twist it how you like and argue up and down

>>NEXT



That they were only made for the emission
Of urine; that our little differences
Are there to distinguish between the sexes,
And for no other reason—who said no?
Experience teaches that it is not so.



Question 2

- Žižek talks of an advertisement, in which a woman turns a frog into a beautiful prince while a man turns a woman into a bottle of beer. Does this advertisement shed some light on Chaucer or his wife of Bath?



The Pardoner Interrupts, Lines 169-75

Up leapt the pardoner—”Now then, madam,
I swear to you by God and by St John,
You make a splendid preacher on this theme.
I was about to wed a wife—but then
Why should my body pay a price so dear?
I’ll not wed this nor any other year!”

“You wait!” said she. “My tale has not begun.



Wife of Bath's Husbands, Lines 199-214

“And now, sir, now, I will begin my tale.

May I never touch a drop of wine or ale


If this be not the truth! Of those I had,

Three were good husbands, two of them were bad,

The three good ones were very rich and old;

.....

>>NEXT



It makes me laugh to think, so help me Christ,
How cruelly I made them sweat at night!
And I can tell you it meant nothing to me.
They'd given me their land and property;
.....
I set no store whatever by their love.



Question 3

- In a society of sexual discrimination, women are mostly silent, even though men exploit and objectify them. The wife of Bath's remark above can annoy her male listeners. Anyway, do you think that Chaucer simply speaks for women through the wife of Bath, or is it possible that Chaucer is also partly an antifeminist?



Men's Attitudes toward Women, Lines 254-74

What a great shame—just think of the expense—


To marry a poor woman, so you tell me,

And if she's rich, and comes of a good family,

It's hell, you say, to put up with her pride,

And her black moods and fancies. Then, you swine,


>>NEXT



Should she be beautiful, you change your line,
And say that every rakehell wants to have her,
That in no time she's bound to lose her honour,
Because it is assailed on every side.

.....

>>NEXT



“And if she’s plain, why then you say that she’s
Setting her cap at every man she sees;
She’ll jump upon him, fawning like a spaniel,
Till someone buys what she has got to sell.



Wife of Bath's Tactics, Lines 390-96

- O Lord! The pain I gave them, and the woe,
- And they, heaven knows, quite innocent of course.
- For I could bite and whinny like a horse.
- I'd scold them even when I was at fault,
- For otherwise I'd often have been dished.
- Who comes first to the mill, is first to grind;



Question 4

- What do the Wife of Bath's attacks against men reveal about the medieval society? Or about sexual relationship in the medieval society?



Lines 531-39

“My fifth husband—may God bless his soul!
Whom I took on for love, and not for gold,
Was at one time a scholar at Oxford,
But had left college, and come home to board
With my best friend, then living in our town:
God keep her soul! Her name was Alison.”



Question 3


- Earlier the miller has told a tale about how a carpenter was cuckolded: his young wife, Alison, betrayed him with an Oxford student. Don't you find the resonance between the wife of Bath's tale and the miller's strange? Can you explain this resonance?



About Anti-feminist Literature, Lines 688-702

And night and morning it was his custom,
Whenever he had leisure and freedom
From any other worldly occupation,
To read in it concerning wicked women.
He knew more lives and legends about them
Than there are of good women in the Bible.

>>NEXT



Make no mistake, it is impossible
That any scholar should speak good of women,
Unless they're saints in the hagiologies;
Not any other kind of woman, no!
Who drew the picture of the lion? Who?

>>NEXT




“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

My God, had women written histories

Like cloistered scholars in oratories,

They'd have set down more of men's wickedness


Than all the sons of Adam could redress.



Lines 794-822

‘When I realized he’d never make an end
But read away in that damned book all night,
All of a sudden I got up and tore
Three pages out of it as he was reading,
And hit him with my fist upon the cheek
So that he tumbled back into our fire,

>>NEXT



And up he jumped just like a raging lion,
And punched me with his fist upon the head
Till I fell to the floor and lay for dead.
And when he saw how motionless I lay,
He took alarm, and would have run away,
Had I not burst at last out of my swoon,
“You’ve murdered me, your dirty thief!” I said,

>>NEXT




.....

‘He came close to me and kneeled gently down,
And said, “My dearest sweetheart Alison,
So help me God, I’ll not hit you again.

.....

>>NEXT



We made it up between the two of us:
He gave the reins to me, and to my hand
Not only management of house and land,
But of his tongue, and also of his fist—
And then and there I made him burn his book!



Question 4

- Chaucer speaks for women through the Wife of Bath. Still, has he done a good job? Or do you not believe that he is on the side of women?




Lines 835-53

The dispute between the Summoner and the Friar

The friar laughed, when he had heard all this.

.....

>>NEXT



‘Oh indeed, Mister Summoner, is that so?’
Returned the friar. ‘My word, before I go
I’ll tell a tale or two about a summoner,
And raise a laugh from everybody here!’

‘Try it and see, Friar,’ said the summoner,
‘And damn your eyes! And damn my own as well
If I’ve not got two or three tales to tell
Concerning friars.....’



Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"

- "The Miller's Tale" and
- Fabliau/ fable: justice
- Parody/ pastiche
- "The Miller's Tale" a Parody of the Knight's Romance



Question 1

- Earlier the Knight told a romance about how two knights were in love with a beautiful lady. Now the Miller decides to tell a story in which two ordinary men try to cuckold a carpenter. Do you see any significance in the Miller's decision?



From “The Miller’s Prologue”

○ Lines 1-19

And when at last the knight’s tale had been told,
There was not one among us, young or old,
Who did not say it was a noble story,
Well worth remembering; especially
All of the better sort. Laughing, our host

>>NEXT



Transition

.....

The miller, half-seas over, was so pale
With drink that he could barely keep his seat
Upon his horse; his manners were quite lost

.....


I've got a splendid tale for the occasion
To pay the knight out with, and cape his tale.”



Lines 59-68

In short, the miller would not curb his tongue
Or language for the sake of anyone,
But told his vulgar tale in his own way.
I'm sorry that I must repeat it here.

>>NEXT



And therefore, I entreat all decent folk
For God's sake don't imagine that I speak
With any evil motive, but because
I'm bound to tell, for better or for worse,
All of their stories, or else falsify



Question 2

- In which way is *The Canterbury Tale* a story-telling contest? Do not forget that Chaucer himself is one of the story-tellers. You may try to answer this question after you are finished with “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”.



The Old Husband, Lines 79-84

At one time there was living at Oxford
A rich old gaffer, carpenter by trade,
Who took in paying guests; and he'd a lodger
Living with him, a needy hard-up scholar
Learned in the liberal arts; but all his fancy
Turned to the study of astrology:



Nicholas the Scholar, Lines 91-95

Fly Nicholas was what they called this scholar.

For love *sub rosa*, pleasing, or for pleasure

In bed or out of it, he'd a great knack'

And he was wily too, and close as wax,

Although he looked as demure as a maid.



Alison the Young Wife, Lines 113-18

The carpenter had a new-wedded wife.

And he loved her; he loved her more than life;

She was no more than eighteen years of age.

Jealous he was, and kept her closely caged,

For she was wild and young, and he was old,

And thought she'd likely make him a cuckold.



The Use of Similes, Lines 125-29

Young, comely was this wife; a lovely girl;
Her body slim and supple as a weasel.
She wore a cross-striped sash, all made of silk;
An apron also, white as morning milk,
She wore about her loins, gored to flare.



Lines 135-40

And certainly she'd a come-hither eye.

Plucked to a slender line were her eyebrows,

And they were arched, and black as any sloes.

Sweeter was she by far to look upon

Than is a pear-tree in its early bloom;


And softer than the wool upon a wether.



Alison Accepts, Lines 163-80

Now sir, and again sir! It so fell out
That this Fly Nicholas began one day
To flirt and play about with this young wife,
Her husband having gone off to Osney
(These scholars are so artful, and so sly!)

>>NEXT



And on the quiet caught her by the cunt,
And said to her, ‘Unless I have my way,
Sweetheart, for love of you I’ll surely die.’

.....

>>NEXT



Saying, ‘I’ll not kiss you, one my word!

Let go,’ she cried, ‘not stop it, Nicholas!

I’ll scream for help, I’ll rouse the neighbourhood!

Take your hands off! It’s no way to behave!”



Absolon the Mimic, Lines 204-24

Now in that church there was a parish clerk

Who answered to the name of Absolon.

His hair was curly, and like gold it shone,

And stuck out wide and broad, just like a winnowing

Fan from each side of a straight, even parting.


His face was red, his eyes grey as a goose.

>>NEXT



Question 3

- What does the Miller's tale reveal about himself?



.....

In twenty different styles he'd jig and dance,
But in the Oxford mode, as was the fashion,
Flinging his legs in every direction;
He'd play upon a tiny two-stringed fiddle
And sometimes he would sing, a loud falsetto;



Nicholas's Plan, Lines 475-86

'But there's one thing I must warn you about;
You'd better bear in mind that on the night
The three of us are embarked on shipboard,
Not one of us must speak a single word,
Call or cry out, but pray to God instead,
For that is the commandment of the Lord.

>>NEXT



You and your wife must hand as far apart

.....

Go, and good luck! Tomorrow night we'll creep

Into our tubs, when everyone's asleep



What happened at that night?

- Absolon came to the window of Alison's bedroom...
- The first time:
- The second time:



Question 4

- A fabliau usually consists of stereotyped characters. In which way is Chaucer's/the miller's tale offbeat with the common fabliaux?



Question 5

- The Medieval literature is moral literature. Can you justify the punishment of each character in the Miller's tale?




The Nun's Priest's Tale

- A Tale Attacking Pride
- An Allegory
- Dream Vision: *Piers Plowman*
- Bird Debate: “The Owl and the Nightingale”



The Widow, Lines 1-3, 10-19

- A hard-up widow, getting on in age,
- Once on a time lived in a small cottage,
- Beside a coppice, standing in a dale,
-
- She had three pigs—three good-sized sows in all—
- Three cows, besides a sheep that she called Moll
- Her bed and living-room was thick with soot,

- 
- And in it many's the scanty meal she ate.
 - She had no need of any piquant sauce,
 - No dainty morsel ever passed her lips;
 - Her diet matched the cottage where she lived,
 - So too much eating never made her sick,
 - Her only medicine was a temperate diet,
 - And exercise, and a contented heart.



Question 1

- The beginning of the Nun's Priest's tale seems suggestive. Can you compare the widow in his tale with the prioress in the General Prologue?




Chanticleer and Pertelote, Lines 27-29, 39-44, 45-50

- She had a closed yard that was fenced about
- With Wooden palings, a dry ditch without,
- In which she kept a cock called Chanticleer.
-
- His comb was redder than the choicest coral,
- And crenellated like a castle wall;
- His beak was black, and like jet its gloss;



- Like lapis-lazuli his legs and toes,
- Each with nails whiter than the lily flower;
- And like the burnished gold was his colour.
-
- This peerless cock had at his disposition
- Seven hens for his delight and delectation,
-

- 
- And the one with the brightest-feathered throat
 - Was called the lovely lady Pertelote.




Bird Debate, Lines 62-67

- And it so came about, one early morning,
- As Chanticleer was sitting among all
- His wives upon the perch inside the hall,
- And next to him the pretty Pertelote,
- He groaned, and went on groaning in his throat,
- Like a man badly troubled in his dream.



Bird Debate, from Pertelote, Lines 100-49

- Have you no man's heart, and yet wear a beard?
- Alas! and can you be afraid of dreams?
-
- Dreams come from overeating, flatulence,
- From temperamental change, which happens if
- One of the body humours is excessive.
-
- Look at Cato, who was so wise a man,

- 
- Didn't he say, "Take no account of dreams?"
 -
 - 'Now sir,' said she, 'when we fly from these beams,
 - You'll take, for goodness' sake, some laxative:

Four Humours

Fire	Water	Earth	Air
Yellow Bile	Phlegm	Black Bile	Blood
Choleric	Phlegmatic	Melancholy	Sanguine




Bird Debate, from Chanticleer, Lines 164-352

- “One of our greatest authors, Cicero,
- Writes thus: Once on a time two friends set out
-
- “Thus we can see that dreams are to be feared.
-
- “What about Kenelm’s dream [Kenelm: an English saint]
-



- Macrobius, who wrote of Scipio's dream
-
- At the Old Testament—see if Daniel
-
- Read about Joseph too,
-
- What about Croesus, King of Lydia
-

- 
- [...]. And what of her,
 - Andromache, she who was Hector's wife?
 - That very night before he was to die
 - She dreamed that Hector was to lose his life
 -
 - --Madam, the meaning of this Latin is,
 - "Woman is man's whole joy and happiness." [actually, "Woman is the ruin of man."]



The Fox and Chanticleer, Lines 367-71

- Now when the month in which the world began,
- The month called March, when God first created man,
-
- It chanced that Chanticleer, in all his pride



Question 2

- We can see that Chanticleer, Pertelote, and the fox resonate with Adam, Eve, and Satan. What can be the significance of this resonance?



Question 3

- The Nun's Priest is a complicated character. His tale touches on the issues of gender and free will, too. Can you try to characterize this person?