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The Wife of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales* seems to be a proud, selfish and independent woman according to the “General Prologue” and “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”. As opposed to this stereotype, when she introduces her fourth husband to the pilgrims, she indirectly shows regret connected to her cruel behaviour towards her husband. The purpose of this essay is to highlight hidden signs of remorse through the Wife’s introduction of her fourth husband (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*. “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” ed. Kökbugur ll. 487-508)<sup>1</sup> with the help of a linguistic and stylistic analysis.

### **Context**

In the original manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, the order of the tales deviates. The sequence, in modern editions, is largely decided by the editor; there are few direct references in the text to the intended succession. However, since there are clear indications of a timeline in the Wife’s, Friar’s and Summoner’s tales, there is definitive proof of their order in relation to each other.

The Friar comments on the Wife’s tale, which means it precedes his own story (“Friar’s Prologue” ll. 1-13). When he shares a parable about a bad summoner, the Summoner among the pilgrims interrupts and swears that he will get even with the Friar for the rude remarks. In his own tale the Summoner answers to the Friar’s rudeness, confirming that his story follows the Friar’s (“The Summoner’s Prologue” ll. 1-18). This proves that the tales of the Wife, the Friar and the Summoner come subsequently.

In “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” the fourth husband is the first to be introduced, since the Wife has nothing special to say about the first three (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” ll. 202-205). He is mentioned once more in the text: at his funeral, the Wife acts as if she were mourning his death. Yet the fact is that she has already chosen her next husband: it is Jenkin, the priest conducting the ceremony (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” ll. 601-605, 633-635).

### **Characterization of the Wife of Bath**

In order to understand why the idea of remorse sounds strange with reference to the Wife, her character must be mapped. She is a wealthy and independent woman, since she has her own cloth-maker business (“General Prologue” ll. 449). Furthermore, she dresses in scarlet during Lent, a period of restraint, and has no problem with being deaf when it comes to socializing. It can be said that she embodies confrontation, which is inappropriate to the medieval female stereotype. In *Chaucer’s Women*, Priscilla Martin calls her a misfit, since

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to this edition will be identified by line numbers.

according to the archetype of Eve, as a wife, she should care about her husband and children, which she never does (Martin 31).

Assumptions about her merciless character are based on medieval statements of her own beauty, recited from late husbands and physiognomy. According to this philosophy, physical appearance would generally reflect personal traits. However, interpretations of her looks contradict each other in different sources, which make this seem to be an unreliable method to map someone's character. For instance, the "General Prologue" portrays the Wife of Bath as a 'gat-tothed' woman, which is a hint to the gap between her front teeth ("General Prologue" ll. 470). Interpretations of her character depend on the size of her teeth. If they are small, slender, and short, then she will be 'good-natured, delicate, gentle, faithful, secretive, timid and agreeable' (Myles, Williams and Wurtele 16).

However, if her teeth are strong, long, and sharp, it may suggest that she is 'envious, irreverent, gluttonous, bold and faithless' or 'vain, lascivious, lying and deceitful' (Myles, Williams and Wurtele 16). These two possibilities are equally plausible since the book does not specify the size of them. As these ideas contradict each other, we cannot draw any conclusions of her character based on her appearance.

The numerous pilgrimages she undertook suggest that the Wife of Bath is in good physical condition, whereas her love of company suggests that she is not timid either; she might well be good-natured and agreeable. There is nothing in the portrait to suggest that she is envious, irreverent, gluttonous, or faithless. Her lavish Sunday garments may mean that she is vain, but the practicality of her pilgrim garb suggests the opposite (Myles, Williams and Wurtele 16).

In short, Chaucer's first readers would have been free to interpret this particular detail of the Wife's outer characteristics as they pleased, according to their prior notions and experience of women, and the degree of their acquaintance with the medieval science of physiognomy.



### Linguistic and stylistic analysis

The chosen passage in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” plays a significant role, since she reveals that she can be quite unforgiving when somebody questions her qualities. Her fourth husband regularly cheated on her. For that she took revenge not just in his life but in his death too, when she buried him in a simple way. The most significant element which indicates this intensified tone in the section is swearing, for example ‘by God and Saint Joce’<sup>2</sup> (ll. 488)<sup>3</sup>. Double negation, which is considered today ungrammatical, emphasizes the passionate intonation. If one negation denied something, more negations increased the negative tone as opposed to Modern English, where two negations re-establish positive meaning, for example, ‘Nat of my body, in no foul manere’ (ll. 491).

Along with the passionate tone, a tint of ironic interpretation is present all through the prologue. Irony can be defined as the amusing or strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what you expect (Simpson, J. A., and E. S.C. Weiner. "Irony"). In this section, the continuous juxtaposition of everyday connotations and elevated similes or metaphors creates the ironic tone, as the following examples present it.

<b>Example 1</b>	<b>‘I made hym of the same wode a croce’ (ll. 490)</b>
	<b>‘in his owene grece I made hym frye’ (ll. 493)</b>
	<b>The same saying in Modern English: stew in one's own juice.</b>
<b>Example 2</b>	<b>‘in erthe I was his purgatorie</b>
	<b>For which I hope his soule be in glorie’ (ll. 495-496)</b>
	<b>‘... his shoo ful bitterly hym wrong!</b>
	<b>... In many wise how soore I hym twiste’ (ll. 498-500)</b>
<b>Example 3</b>	<b>‘Al is his tombe nocht so curyus</b>
	<b>As was the sepulcre of hym Daryus,</b>
	<b>Which that Appelles wroghte subtilly.’ (ll. 503-505)</b>

<sup>2</sup>Saint Joce (Josse, Judocus) was a widely known saint in the Medieval Europe, whose symbol was a ‘wooden shepherd’s staff carried by a pilgrim’. In this respect, it can be either a reference to the phallus, or to the Wife’s pilgrimages. (Haskell 86)

<sup>3</sup> All further references of line numbers are from the chosen fragment of “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” and they are all cited from the same online edition of Kökbugur.

In example 1 and 2, the metaphors clash: the elevated, religious tone of the first sharply contrasts with the down-to-earth nature of the second. Yet, the second may derive from an Ancient anecdote about the unhappy marriage of a sage (Brewer “Shoe Pinches”), which elevates this one, too. The third example mixes these tones in the same sentence when comparing the husband’s tomb to the sepulchre of Darius. All these unexpected changes provide a firm base for humorous interpretation.

However, irony is somewhat mixed with remorse, which is quite contradictory. She accepts that she acted usually viciously towards him when attempting to justify that he must have gone to heaven. Her argument is based on the theory that he had already paid for all his sins here on earth through his wife’s purgatory. The vocabulary also reflects her repentance and forgiveness, as the following table presents it.

Revenge	Remorse
‘despit’ (ll. 487)	‘quit’ (ll. 499)
‘angre’; ‘jalousye’ (ll. 494)	
‘purgatorie’ (ll. 495)	‘glorie’ (ll. 496)
‘song’ (ll. 497)	
‘wrong’ (ll. 498)	‘reste’ (ll. 507)
‘in his owene grece I made hym frye’ (ll. 493)	
‘In many wise how soore I hym twiste’ (ll. 500)	‘Lat hym fare-wel’ (ll. 507)
‘It nys but wast to burye hym preciously’ (ll. 506)	

Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." *The Canterbury Tales and Other Works by Geoffrey Chaucer (1342 - 1400)*. Ed. Sinan Kökbugur

The same implied meaning can be found with reference to wilful wrongdoing by the active voice of the subject, the Wife (ll. 490). In the same line a parallel is drawn with Christ's cross representing suffering and victimization of the husband. While putting these polar verbal expressions in one concise sentence, the Wife’s remorse appears as a confession.

#### **‘I made hym of the same wode a croce’ (ll.490)**

So that underlying remorse be discovered, it is crucial to study polysemous words. The two most significant examples are ‘despit’ (ll. 487) and ‘chest’ (ll. 508). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, it means ‘a feeling or attitude of contempt, disdain, or haughtiness; ill will, malice, hostility’, ‘a state deserving contempt or disdain; disgrace, shame’, ‘spite, defiance, disobedience’, ‘an act designed to humiliate, insult, or harm someone; humiliation, insult, injury, outrage, or an instance of it’ or ‘injured feeling, resentment, grudging’.

(McSparran “despit”) In this respect the first line ‘I seye, I hadde in herte greet despit’ (ll. 487) can be interpreted as ‘I had great contempt in my heart’ or ‘I was disobedient’. As long as the second example is a confession of the Wife about her regretted behaviour, the first one turns to the husband with disdain because of his adultery. This ambiguous sentence reveals the penitent layer of the Wife’s character; however, it also presents her previous anger towards her former husband.

In the same dictionary, the ‘chest’ (ll. 508) (n.) also ‘**cheest, cheast, chyast, chast,** (late) **ches,** (?error) **chost**’ entry provides two possible meanings: ‘strife, contention, fighting; quarreling, bickering, caviling; a quarrel, dispute, or disturbance’ or ‘trouble, tribulation, suffering’. In Modern English, the meaning, which survived is based on the same idea of holding something inside, like a container; a tomb, a body of a person or a piece of furniture. This is a framework for something to hold it together or to hide it. Abide by, ‘He is now in his grave, and in his cheste.’ (ll. 508) may mean either that he is buried in his coffin or that he is stuck in his body. The first interpretation seems to be a simple statement; however, it can mean that the Wife considers this part of her life already finished and she does not want to think about her fourth husband longer, since new adventures are on the horizon. The second interpretation may carry the inference that the soul of the departed husband stayed captured in the chest and could not start its journey towards purgatory, heaven or hell. The reason for this is that the active voice, the Wife declares that she herself was his purgatory (ll. 495); this oxymoron is another proof of her remorse. Further on, this would mean that she will also burn in purgatory for all the harm she caused him. In this respect, remorse is the key to get indulgence.

### **Conclusion**

Even though the Wife’s behaviour and outward appearance seem to suggest a merciless character, stylistic and linguistic analysis provides proof of a remorseful and forgiving nature, too. The tension between the ironic and the penitent tone, ambiguous expressions, syntactically simple and short sentences provide a firm base to reconsider the complexity of the Wife of Bath’s inner traits. Without a linguistic analysis, these details cannot be discovered in their whole depth, since editorial decisions and translations can alter

the original meaning to a great extent.



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