

## Group Work – “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”

1a. Quickly, how does the Wife take a poke at Friars in the following line: “They search the countryside through field and stream/As thick as motes that speckle a sunbeam” (41-42)? Look up “motes.” Look at the description of the Friar (and monk) in the prologue – how do their actions towards women contribute to who or what the wife of Bath is? Be specific in your answer – use at least 2 quotes in answering this question. What happens when a mote gets in the eye?

1b. The saying about “a mote in one’s eye,” is biblical in origin: “Why do you look at the mote of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3). How then is her comment ironic? Consider Chaucer’s forced deathbed retraction at the hands of the Catholic Church. How was Chaucer a mote in his (Chaucer’s; “your brother’s”) eye – what was the collective plank that they ignored in their own? Explain.

2. How is the Queen’s quest for the knight an appropriate punishment for what he has done? Be specific, and include at least one quote.



3. Take a look at lines 214-217 (*Elements of Lit*). How do these lines fit in with the Wife of Bath’s own philosophy of marriage? Go back to her prologue and find two quotes that match the ideas expressed in these lines. Explain the quotes’ significance.

4. Look at lines 270-274 (*Elements of Lit*). How are these lines connected to the Wife’s anger and frustration at the book that Johnny reads aloud in her prologue. Consider at this time the following metaquestion: How does the *Shaper* fit in with men’s attitudes towards women (be sure to consider what your group knows about chivalry, Johnny’s book, etc.) Find at least one quote to support your

answer. Here’s the *meta part* (brain start hurting) – How then does a book, a tale like this affect its readers (then & now) attitudes towards the same subject? Often during discussion of “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” there are students that start out not liking the Wife (Allison), but by the end of the discussion, they often admire her (sometimes profoundly). Connect.

5. Read the excerpt from *A Distant Mirror* by Barbara W. Tuchman (in the box below). Briefly explain how what she says relates directly to the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” (note: “Prologue” not “Tale”) There is a lot here, but go for the connection with which **you can be most specific**. Use what you came up with in questions 1a & 1b, as well. Use at least 2 quotes from “The Wife’s Prologue” as well as 2 (put the matching quotes next to each other) from Tuchman’s text in answering the question (for a total of 4 quotes). Don’t forget the antagonism between the Wife of Bath and the friar (ahhh...)

Woman was the Church’s rival, the temptress, the distraction, the obstacle to holiness, the Devil’s decoy. In the *Speculum* of Vincent de Beauvais, greatest of the 13<sup>th</sup> century encyclopedists and a favorite of St. Louis, woman is “the confusion of man, an insatiable beast, a continuous anxiety, an incessant warfare, a daily ruin, a house of tempest,” and – finally the key – “a hindrance to devotion.” Vincent was a Dominican of the severe order that bred the Inquisitors, which may account for his pyramid of overstatement, but preachers in general were not far behind. They denounced women on the one hand for being the slaves of vanity and fashion, for monstrous headdresses and the “lascivious and carnal procreation” of their garments, and on the other hand for being over-industrious, too occupied with children and housekeeping, too earthbound to five due thought to divine things.

Marriage was the relationship of the sexes that absorbed major interest. More than any other, it is the subject on the minds of the Canterbury pilgrims and its dominant theme is who, as between husband and wife, is boss? In real life too the question of obedience dominates the manual of conduct composed by the *Menagier of Paris* for his fifteen-year-old wife. She should obey her husband’s commandments and act according to his pleasure rather than her own, because “his pleasure should come before yours.” She should not be arrogant or answer back or contradict him, especially in public, for “it is the command of God that women should be subject of men. . . and by good obedience a wise woman gains her husband’s love and at the end has what she would of him.”

6. Consider the relationship between “The Pardoner’s Prologue” and his tale: he presents himself as a charlatan and then proceeds to tell a story of virtue and righteousness (that he attempts to use to sway the pilgrims to buy his wares.) Now, what is the central theme or moral of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”? What does she say women want? Now take another look at her prologue. What is the relationship between *her* prologue and *her* tale. Which of the two prologue-tale relationships is more “honest.” Be very specific in your answer, using at least 1 quote from each of the 4 readings in proving your answer.

7. Big thinking question: If you can accept that *The Canterbury Tales* (given its realistic characters and ideas) is *closer* to the modern *Grendel* than it is to *Beowulf* (written down only a few hundred years before *The Canterbury Tales* – though it was composed much earlier), then what about the relative *closeness* of the Wife’s tale of the knight to *Beowulf* or *Grendel*? – Which is it closer to and why – notice and comment on how her tale amplifies (shapes?) her more realistic prologue – relate how *Grendel* similarly amplifies and uses *Beowulf*.