

The Wife of Bath

DESCRIPTION OF THE WIFE OF BATH FROM THE GENERAL PROLOGUE^o TO THE CANTERBURY TALES

- A445 A good wif^o was there of beside Bathe,
But she was somdel deef, and that was scathe.
Of clooth-making she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.^o
In all the pariss, wif ne was there noon
A450 That to the offring before her sholde goon.^o

*just outside Bath
somewhat deaf / regrettable
such skill
surpassed them*

General Prologue: In the General Prologue, Chaucer describes the gathering of his fellow pilgrims at the Tabard Inn in London before their journey to Canterbury. He also describes most of the individual pilgrims he meets there. This is Chaucer's 32-line description of the Wife of Bath — identified later (line 320 in her prologue) by the name "Alys" and (in 804) "Alisoun." The letter at the start of the line numbers indicates that the lines are from the first fragment, known as Fragment I or Group A, of the *Canterbury Tales*.

A445. wif: The term could refer to a married woman, but also simply to a woman. In any case, the Wife of Bath is more technically a widow than a wife at this time, and the old woman in her tale, also referred to as a "wif" in line 998, is not a married woman.

A448. Ypres and Gaunt: Two towns in what is now Belgium noted for their fine cloth-making. The second is now called Ghent.

A450. before her . . . goon: Before she goes to make her offering. She apparently considers that her wealth gives her a right to make first offering — probably to be taken as a sign of her pride.

- And if there did, certeyn so wrooth was she
That she was out of alle charitee.
Her coverchiefs ful fine weren of ground —
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound —
A455 That on a Sunday weren upon her heed.
Her hosen weren of fin scarlet red,
Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moiste and newe.
Boold was her face, and fair, and reed of hewe.
She was a worthy womman all her live.
A460 Housbondes at chirche dore^o she hadde five,
Withouten^o oother compaignye in youthe.
But therof nedeth not to speke as nowthe.
And thries had she been at Jerusalem.
She hadde passed many a straunge strem.^o
A465 At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.^o
She koude muchel of wandring by the weye.
Gat-tothed^o was she, soothly for to seye.
Upon an amblere esily she sat,
A470 Ywimpled^o well, and on her heed an hat
As brood as is a bokeler or a targe,^o
A foot-mantel about her hipes large,
And on her feet a pair of spores sharpe.
In felawship well koude she laugh and carpe.
A475 Of remedies of love^o she knew per chaunce,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce.

*so angry
unforgiving
head-scarfs / finely spun
weighed ten pounds
head
stockings
tightly laced / supple
red-colored
life
at the present time
thrice
She knew much
to say the truth
smooth-riding horse
head
apron
sharp spurs
jest
knew / all the old tricks*

A460. at chirche dore: Marriages were often performed publicly at the door or vestibule of the church, before the bride and groom went inside to attend a service. By stipulating the location, the Wife would have been legitimizing her marriages and her right to certain properties.

A461. Withouten: Not to mention. The line is usually taken to mean that she had other sexual company before she was married, but Chaucer is ambiguous about the point. It could mean simply that she was "without other company before she was married."

A464. passed many . . . strem: Crossed many foreign rivers.

A465–66. At Rome . . . Coloigne: Sites of several of the most famous religious shrines of medieval Europe, all of which Alisoun has visited in addition to the three pilgrimages to Jerusalem mentioned in line A463.

A468. Gat-tothed: According to some physiognomists (scientists who studied the relationship between the physical configuration of the head and face and the moral and intellectual qualities of the person), having gaps between the teeth could indicate pride and heightened sexuality. The word "gat" may be related to the word "goat" — an animal noted in Chaucer's time for its sexuality.

A470. Ywimpled: With her head and neck covered by a "wimple" or linen cloth.

A471. a bokeler or a targe: A "buckler" is a small shield; a targe is a larger one.

A475. remedies of love: Solutions to love problems, or erotic stimulants, perhaps associated with Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*.