The Wife of Bath’s Tale
from The Canterbury Tales

Poetry by GEOFFREY CHAUCER
Translated by NEVILL COGHLI

Build Background

Romance and Chivalry "The Wife of Bath’s Tale" belongs to the so-called Marriage Group of The Canterbury Tales, in which different pilgrims offer stories that express their philosophies of love and marriage. Set in the days of Britain's legendary King Arthur, the story qualifies as a medieval romance—an adventure tale of knights and chivalry, in which the code of ideal knightly behavior (loyalty, faith, honor, and courtesy, especially to women) is stressed. In this story, however, a knight breaks the rules of chivalry and, as punishment, must undertake a quest.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS NARRATOR Whether a story is told in prose or verse, the narrator is the person or voice that tells the story. In The Canterbury Tales, the narrator of the “Prologue” introduces the characters who will serve as narrators of the tales that follow. Reread lines 455–486 of the “Prologue” (page 125), which introduce the Wife of Bath. Then try to predict the view of love and marriage that she might present in her tale.

ACTIVE READING ANALYZING STRUCTURE Structure is the way in which the parts of a literary work are put together. A frame story is a story that serves as a narrative setting or frame for one or more other stories. The Canterbury Tales as a whole has a frame structure, in which the story of the pilgrims serves as a frame within which the pilgrims tell their stories. The structure of "The Wife of Bath’s Tale" features a main plot with several interruptions. For example, in the opening lines the Wife of Bath interrupts the main plot with a passage in which she criticizes friars. This particular interruption stems from the Wife's ongoing quarrel with the Friar as they travel to Canterbury.

READER’S NOTEBOOK As you read "The Wife of Bath’s Tale," use a chart similar to the one shown to keep track of the interruptions to the main story.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview
abominably implore beguileth main convolde prowess contemptuous rebuke costet statute crane temporal depented tribulation ecstasy

154 UNIT ONE AUTHOR STUDY GEOFFREY CHAUCER
from The Wife of Bath’s Prologue

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon
“Madam,” he said, “by God and by St. John,
That’s noble preaching no one could surpass!
I was about to take a wife; alas!
Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?
There’ll be no marrying for me this year!”

You’ll taste another brew before I’ve done;
You’ll find it doesn’t taste as good as ale;
And when I’ve finished telling you my tale
Of tribulation in the married life
In which I’ve been an expert as a wife,
That is to say, myself have been the whip.
So please yourself whether you want to sip
At that same cask of marriage I shall broach,
Be cautious before making the approach,
For I’ll give instances, and more than ten,
And those who won’t be warned by other men,
By other men shall suffer their correction,
So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.
You read his Almagest; you’ll find it there.”

“Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,”
The Pardoner said, “go on as you began!
Tell us you tale, spare not for any man.
Instruct us younger men in your technique.”
“Gladly,” she said, “if you will let me speak.
But still I hope the company won’t reprove me
Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,
And please don’t be offended at my views;
They’re really only offered to amuse...”

WORDS

tribulation (trı-bə-yəl’-ən) n. suffering; great distress

15 cask: barrel; broach: tap into.

20 Ptolemy (pə-lē’-mē) a famous astronomer of the second century A.D. The Almagest, his most famous work, does not, however, contain the proverb cited in lines 18–19.
The Wife of Bath’s Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.
The Eli-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke
Their elfin dance on many a green mead,
Or so was the opinion once, I read,
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.
But no one now sees fairies any more.
For now the saintly charity and prayer
Of holy friars seem to have purged the air:
They stanch the countryside through field and stream
As thick as mores that speckle a sun-beam,
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,
Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,
And that’s the reason why there are no fairies.
Wherever there was want to walk an elf
To-day there walks the holy friar himself
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,
Saying his matins and his holy things,
Walking his limit round from town to town.
Women can now go safely up and down
By every bush or under every tree;
There is no other incubus but he,
So there is really no one else to hurt you
And he will do no more than take your virtue.

Now it so happened, I began to say,
Long, long ago is good King Arthur’s day,
There was a knight who was a lusty liver.
One day as he came riding from the river
He saw a maiden walking all forlorn
Ahead of him, alone as she was born.
And of that maiden, spite of all she said,
By very force he took her maidenhead.

This act of violence made such a stir,
So much petitioning to the king for her,
That he condemned the knight to lose his head
By course of law. He was as good as dead

35 mead: meadow.
42 mores: spots of dust.
43 bowers: bedrooms.
45 thorpes: villages; outhouses: sheds.
47 wherever . . . elf: wherever an elf was accustomed to walk.
51 limit: the area to which a friar was restricted in his begging for donations.
54 incubus (inˈki-bəs): an evil spirit believed to descend on women while they sleep.
59–56 What seems to be the wife of Bath’s attitude toward friars?
61 forlorn: sad and lonely.
63–64 of that maiden . . . maidenhead: in spite of the maiden’s protests, he robbed her of her virtue.
(It seems that then the statutes took that view)

But that the queen, and other ladies too,
Implied the king to exercise his grace
So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case
And granted her his life, and she could choose
Whether to show him mercy or refuse.

The queen returned him thanks with all her might,
And then she sent a summons to the knight
At her convenience, and expressed her will;
"You stand, for such is the position still,
Is no way certain of your life," said she,

"Yet you shall live if you can answer me:
What is the thing that women most desire?
Beware the axe and say as I require.

"If you can't answer on the moment, though,
I will concede you this: you are to go
A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn
Sufficient answer, then you shall return.
I shall take gages from you to extort
Surrender of your body to the court."

Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,
But there! All other choices were denied,
And in the end he chose to go away
And to return after a year and day
Armed with such answer as there might be sent
To him by God. He took his leave and went.

He knocked at every house, searched every place,
Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.
What could it be that women wanted most?
But all the same he never touched a coast,
Country or town in which there seemed to be
Any two people willing to agree.

Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,
"Home," said some, some "Jollity and pleasure."

WORDS
statute (stät‘ët) n. a law
implore (im‘plôr‘) v. to pray; beg
know (know) v. to grant or acknowledge, often unwillingly

65-74 What punishment do the king and the law demand? To whom does the king grant the final judgment?

71 grace: mercy; clemency.
87 against: pleases.
Some "Gorgeous clothes" and others "Fun in bed,"
To be oft widowed and remarried," said

Others again, and some that what most mattered
Was that we should be consired and flattered.
That's very near the truth, it seems to me;
A man can win us best with flattery.
To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,
Ensnares us all, the best and worst of us.

Some say the things we most desire are these:
Freedom to do exactly as we please,
With no one to reprove our faults and lies,
Rather to have one call us good and wise.

Truly there's not a woman in ten score
Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,
But she will kick if what he says is true;
You try it out and you will find so too.
However vicious we may be within
We like to be thought wise and void of sin.
Others assert we women find it sweet
When we are thought dependable, discreet
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,
Never betraying things that we are told.
But that's not worth the handle of a rake;
Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!
Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?

Among some other little things, now stale,
Ovid relates that under his long hair
The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair
Of ass's ears; as subtly as he might,
He kept his foul deformity from sight;
Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.
He loved her best, and trusted in her too.

He begged her not to tell a living creature
That he possessed so horrible a feature.
And she—she swore, were all the world to win,
She would not do such villainy and sin.
As saddle her husband with so foul a name;
Besides to speak would be to share the shame.
Nevertheless she thought she would have died
Keeping this secret bottled up inside;

WORDS
TO
KNOW

Cosset (kō'sēt) v. to treat like a pet; pamper

115 ten score: 200.
117 but she will: who will not.
120 void of sin: sinless.
127 Midas: a legendary king of Phrygia in Asia Minor.
129 Ovid (ō'vid) n. an ancient Roman poet whose
Metamorphoses is a storehouse of Greek and Roman legends.
According to Ovid, it was a barber, not Midas's wife, who told the
secret of his donkey's ears.
133 save: except.
It seemed to swell her heart and she, so doubt, 
Thought it was on the point of bursting out.

145 Fear to speak of it to woman or man, 
Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran 
And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire 
And, as a bittern bannels in the mire, 
She whispered to the water, near the ground, 
"Betray me not, O water, with thy sound! 
To thee alone I tell it: it appears 
My husband has a pair of ass's ears! 
Ah! My heart's well again, the secret's out! 
I could no longer keep it, not a doubt."

150 And so you see, although we may hold fast 
A little while, it must come out at last, 
We can't keep secrets; as for Midas, well, 
Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.

This knight that I am telling you about
Perceived at last he never would find out
What it could be that women loved the best. 
Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast, 
As he went, he dared no longer stay; 
His year was up and now it was the day.

165 As he rode home in a dejected mood
Suddenly, at the margin of a wood, 
He saw a dance upon the leafy floor
Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more. 
Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn
Some words of wisdom ere he should return;
But lo! Before he came to where they were,
Dancers and dance all vanished into air!
There wasn't a living creature to be seen
Save one old woman crouched upon the green.

170 A fouler-looking creature I suppose
Could scarcely be imagined. She arose
And said, "Sir knight, there's no way on from here, 
Tell me what you are looking for, my dear, 
For peradventure that were best for you;
We old, old women know a thing or two."

WORDS
TO
KNOW

147 sedge: marsh grasses.  
148 bumbles in the mine: booms in the swamp. (The bittern, a wading bird, is famous for its loud call.)  
149 What does this comparison suggest about the queen's whisper?  
159 peradventure: perhaps.
“Dear Mother,” said the knight, “alack the day! I am as good as dead if I can’t say What thing it is that women most desire; If you could tell me I would pay your hire.”

“Give me your hand,” she said, “and swear to do Whatever I shall next require of you —If so to do should lie within your might— And you shall know the answer before night.”

“Upon my honor,” he answered, “I agree.”

“Then,” said the crone, “I dare to guarantee Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim. Upon my life the queen will say the same. Show me the very proudest of them all In costly coverchief and jewelled caul

That dare say so to what I have to teach. Let us go forward without further speech.” And then she crooned her gospel in his ear And told him to be glad and not to fear.

They came to court. This knight, in full array, Stood forth and said, “O Queen, I’ve kept my day And kept my word and have my answer ready.”

There sat the noble matrons and the heady Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace Of wisdom, all assembled in that place, And there the queen herself was throned to hear And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near And silence was commanded through the hall.

The queen gave order he should tell them all What thing it was that women wanted most. He stood not silent like a beast or post, But gave his answer with the ringing word Of a man’s voice and the assembly heard:

“My liege and lady, in general,” said he, “A woman wants the self-same sovereignty Over her husband as over her lover, And master him; he must not be above her.

WORDS TO KNOW

181 alack the day: an exclamation of sorrow, roughly equivalent to “Woe is me!”

194 coverchief: kerchief; caul (kaul): an ornamental hair-net.
196 gospel: message.
199 in full array: in all his finery
202 heaud: giddy; impetuous.
203 grace: gift.

213 liege (lē): lord.
214 sovereignty (sov’ē-rēn’sē): rule; power.
214–215 How might a woman’s power over a man differ from her power over a husband?
Thai is your greatest wish, whether you kill
Or spare me; please yourself. I wait your will.

In all the court not one that shook her head
220
Or contradicted what the knight had said;
Maid, wife and widow cried, "He's saved his life!"

And on the word up stepped the old wife,
The one the knight saw sitting on the green,
And cried, "Your mercy, sovereign lady queen!
225
Before the court disperses, do me right!
"Twas I who taught this answer to the knight,
For which he swore, and pledged his honor to it,
That the first thing I asked of him he'd do, r
So far as it should lie within his might.
230
Before this court I ask you then, sir knight,
To keep your word and take me for your wife;
For well you know that I have saved your life.
If this be false, deny it on your sword!"

"Alas!" he said, "Old lady, by the Lord
235
I know indeed that such was my behest,
But for God's love think of a new request,
Take all my goods, but leave my body free."
"A curse on us," she said, "if I agree!
I may be foul, I may be poor and old,
240
Yet will not choose to be, for all the gold
That's bedded in the earth or lies above,
Less than your wife, nay, than your very love!"

"My love?" said he. "By heaven, my damnation!
245
Alas that any of my race and station
Should ever make so foul a misalliance!"
Yet in the end his pleading and dehance
All went for nothing, he was forced to wed.
He takes his ancient wife and goes to bed.

Now peradventure some may well suspect
250
A lack of care in me since I neglect
To tell of the rejoicing and display,
Made at the feast upon their wedding-day.
i have but a short answer to let fall;
I say there was no joy or feast at all,
Nothing but heaviness of heart and sorrow.
He married her in private on the morrow
And all day long stayed hidden like an owl,
It was such torture that his wife looked foul.

Great was the anguish churning in his head

When he and she were piloted to bed;
He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.
His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;
At last she said, “Bless us! Is this, my dear,
How knights and wives get on together here?
Are these the laws of good King Arthur’s house?
I am your own beloved and your wife,
And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;
And certainly I never did you wrong.

Then why, this first of nights, so sad a song?
You’re carrying on as if you were half-witted.
Say, for God’s love, what sin have I committed?
I’ll put things right if you will tell me how.”

“Put right?” he cried. “That never can be now!
Nothing can ever be put right again!
You’re old, and so abominably plain,
So poor to start with, so low-bred to follow;
It’s little wonder if I twist and wallow!
God, that my heart would burst within my breast!”

“Is that,” said she, “the cause of your unrest?”

“Yes, certainly,” he said, “and can you wonder?”

“I could set right what you suppose a blunder,
That’s if I cared to, in a day or two,
If I were shown more courtesy by you.

Just now,” she said, “you spoke of gentle birth,
Such as descends from ancient wealth and worth.
If that’s the claim you make for gentlemen
Such arrogance is hardly worth a ken.
Whoever loves to work for virtuous ends,

WORDS
contemptuous (kan’t-em-psh’o-bus) adj. scornful, openly disrespectful
abominably (a-böm’a-nə-bil’i) adv. unpleasantly, terribly

KNOW

255 256 257 258 259 260 261
“Thus the wise poet of the Florentines, Dante by name, has written in these lines, For such is the opinion Dante launches: ‘Seldom arises by these slender branches Prowess of men, for it is God, no less, Wills us to claim of Him our gentleness.’ For of our parents nothing can we claim Save temporal things, and these may hurt and main.

“...But everyone knows this as well as I; For if gentility were implanted by The natural course of lineage down the line, Public or private, could it cease to shine In doing the fair work of gentle deed? No vice or villany could then bear seed.

“...Take fire and carry it to the darkest house Between this kingdom and the Caucasus, And shut the doors on it and leave it there, It will burn on, and it will burn as fair As if ten thousand men were there to see, For fire will keep its nature and degree, I can assure you, sir, until it dies.

“But gentleness, as you will recognize, Is not annexed in nature to possessions, Men fall in living up to their professions; But fire never ceases to be fire.

WORDS YOU KNOW

bequest (bĕ-kwest') n. to leave in a will; give as an inheritance
prowess (pro-wes') n. superior skill; great ability
temporal (tem'par-əl) adj. of the material world; not eternal
main (mêt) v. to disable or permanently wound

280 285-292 What does the old woman think is the chief qualification of a gentleman? How would you define “gentle birth” and “gentleness” as used in this passage?

301 Florentines: the people of Florence, Italy.
302 Dante (där'tā): a famous medieval Italian poet. The quotation in lines 304-306 is a paraphrase of a passage in Dante’s most famous work, The Divine Comedy, which he completed in 1321.
310 gentility (jen'ta-lētē): the quality possessed by a gentle, or noble, person.
316 Caucasus (kə-ca'sēs): a region of western Asia, between the Black and Caspian seas.
324 professions: beliefs, ideals.
God knows you'll often find, if you enquire,
Some lodging full of villainy and shame.
If you would be esteemed for the mere name
Of having been by birth a gentleman
And stemming from some virtuous, noble clan,
And do not live yourself by gentle deed
Or take your father's noble name and creed,
You are no gentleman, though duke or earl.
Vice and bad manners are what make a churl.

"Gentility is only the renown
For bounty that your fathers handed down,
Quite foreign to your person, not your own;
Gentility must come from God alone.
That we are gentle comes to us by grace
And by no means is it bequeathed with place.

"Reflect how noble (says Valerius)
Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,
Who rose from poverty to nobleness.
And read Boethius, Seneca no less,
Thus they express themselves and are agreed:
'Gentle is he that does a gentle deed.'
And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude
That even if my ancestors were rude,
Yet God on high—and so I hope He will—
Can grant me grace to live in virtue still,
A gentlewoman only when beginning
To live in virtue and to shrink from sinning.

As for my poverty which you reprove,
Almighty God Himself in whom we move,
Relieve and have our being, chose a life
Of poverty, and every man or wife,
Nay, every child can see our Heavenly King
Would never stoop to choose a shameful thing.
No shame in poverty if the heart is gay,
As Seneca and all the learned say.
He who accepts his poverty unhurt
I'd say is rich although he lacked a shirt.
But truly poor are they who whine and fret
And cover what they cannot hope to get.

And he who, having nothing, covets not,
Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.

"True poverty can find a song to sing. Juvenal says a pleasant little thing: 'The poor can dance and sing in the relief Of having nothing that will tempt a thief.' Though it be hateful, poverty is good, A great incentive to a livelihood, And a great help to our capacity For food, if accepted patiently.

Poverty is, though wanting in estate, A kind of wealth that none canniata. Poverty often, when the heart is lovelv, Brings one to God and teaches what is holy, Gives knowledge of oneself and even lends A glass by which to see one's truest friends. And since it's no offense, let me be plain, Do not rebuke my poverty again.

"Lastly you taxed me, sir, with being old. Yet even if you never had been told

By ancient books, you gentlemen engage, Yourselves in honor to respect old age. To call an old man 'father' shows good breeding, And this could be supported from my reading.

"You say I'm old and fouler than a fen.

You need not fear to be a cuckold, then. Fifth and old age, I'm sure you will agree, Are powerful wardens over chastity. Nevertheless, well knowing your delights, I shall fulfill your worldly appetites.

"You have two choices; which one will you try? To have me old and ugly till I die, But still a loyal, true, and humble wife That never will displease you all her life, Or would you rather I was young and pretty

And chance your arm what happens in a city Where friends will visit you because of me, Yes, and in other places too, maybe.

WORDS TO 

rebuff (ri-by0f/0) v. to criticize

KNOW

366 sot: fool.
368 Juvenal (j0-v3-nel): an ancient Roman satirist
375. wanting in estate: lacking in grandeur.
376 calumniate (k0-lm-nat): criticize with false statements; slander.
385 fen: marsh.
390 cuckold (k0k’/id): a husband whose wife is unfaithful.
400 chance your arm: take your chance on.
Which would you have? The choice is all your own.*

The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan
At last he said, with all the care in life,
“My lady and my love, my dearest wife,
I leave the matter to your wise decision.
You make the choice yourself, for the provision
Of what may be agreeable and rich
In honor to us both, I don’t care which;
Whatever pleases you suffices me.”

“And have I won the mastery?” said she,
“Since I’m to choose and rule as I think fit?”
“Certainly, wife,” he answered her, “that’s it.”
“Kiss me,” she cried. “No quarrels! On my oath
And word of honor, you shall find me both,
That is, both fair and faithful as a wife;
May I go howling mad and take my life
Unless I prove to be as good and true
As ever wife was since the world was new!
And if to-morrow when the sun’s above
I seem less fair than any lady-love,
Than any queen or empress east or west,
Do with my life and death as you think best.
Cast up the curtain, husband. Look at me!”

And when indeed the knight had looked to see,
Lo, she was young and lovely, rich in charms.
In ecstasy he caught her in his arms,
His heart went bounding in a bath of bliss.
And melted in a hundred thousand kisses,
And she responded in the fullest measure
With all that could delight or give him pleasure.

So they lived ever after to the end
In perfect bliss; and may Christ Jesus send
Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed,
And grace to overbid them when we wed.
And—Jesu hear my prayer!—cut short the lives
Of those who won’t be governed by their wives;
And afold, angry niggards of their pence,
God send them soon a very pestilence!

WORDS
TO
KNOW

extasy n. intense joy or delight; bliss

404 piteous (pī’tē-əs) pitiful; pathetic.

411 suffices (sə-fis’əs) satisfies. How does the knight's statement relate to what he has learned about "the things that women most desire"?

439 niggards: misers.
Connect to the Literature
1. **What Do You Think?**
   Were you surprised by the outcome of the knight’s quest? Why or why not?

2. **Think Critically**
   In what way is the question that the queen poses to the knight related to the crime that he has committed?

3. **What Theme, or message, about marriage would you say the tale conveys?** Do you agree with the message? Why or why not?

4. **Active Reading: Analyzing Structure**
   Look over your chart in your Reader’s Notebook and review the reasons you inferred. What do the interruptions tell you about what matters to the Wife of Bath?

5. **Consider the narrator of the “Prologue.” How would you describe his values?**
   - his characterizations of people like the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Wife of Bath
   - his opinions of their actions
   - his description of himself as “short of wit” in line 766 of the “Prologue” (page 134)

Extend Interpretations
6. **Comparing Texts** Which part of The Canterbury Tales—the “Prologue” or the two tales—did you find the most enjoyable or interesting? Give reasons for your choice.

7. **Critic’s Corner**
   One critic has described Chaucer as “a modern writer,” one whose work can be appreciated by every generation of readers. Do you agree with this observation? Cite specific passages of The Canterbury Tales to back up your opinion.

8. **Connect to Life** Do you see any similarities between the attitudes of the Wife of Bath and the old woman in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and the attitudes of modern American women? Cite details to support your answer.

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**Literary Analysis**

**Variant**

The teller of a story in prose or verse is known as the story’s **narrator**. The narrator may be a character in the story or a voice outside the action. In the “Prologue” from The Canterbury Tales, a narrator (whom Chaucer identifies as himself) introduces several characters, who then narrate the various tales.

**Cooperative Learning Activity** In a small-group discussion, consider how the portrait of the Wife of Bath in lines 455–486 of the “Prologue” (page 125) relates to the tale that she tells. Then work with the group to create a chart in which you list as many details about the Wife of Bath as you can. Include details about her appearance, skills, social position, personality, attitudes, and motives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>worthy</td>
<td>“Prologue,” lines 455 and 486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat deaf</td>
<td>“Prologue,” line 456</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chaucer's enduring appeal as a poet stems in part from the humor and realism of his characterizations. Chaucer had no illusions about humanity, yet he showed a genuine fondness for human beings—wants and all. His combination of detachment and sympathy distinguishes his writing style.

Key Aspects of Chaucer's Style
- a gentle irony that exposes characters' faults while emphasizing their essential humanity
- a use of vivid but spare imagery and figurative language in describing characters' physical appearance
- a clear differentiation between characters
- a stylistic appropriateness of the tales to their narrators (Each character has a particular "voice")

Analysis of Style
On the right are five excerpts from The Canterbury Tales. Study the chart above and read the excerpts carefully. Then,
- find examples of the listed aspects of Chaucer's style
- explain what, if anything, is amusing about each excerpt and identify which aspects of style contribute to this effect
- go back through the selections from The Canterbury Tales and find other examples of these key aspects of Chaucer's style

Applications
1. Speaking and Listening With a partner, study the description of either the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath in the "Prologue." Then read aloud selected passages from the character's tale in the way that the character might have told it. Have your partner critique your oral interpretation and suggest improvements.
2. Illustrating Style Choose one of Chaucer's pilgrims whose physical appearance is vividly described. Then draw a picture of the character, based on Chaucer's description.
3. Imagining Style In poetry or prose, create a character (preferably from a modern profession) and describe him or her with the mixture of detachment and sympathy that Chaucer used to such advantage.

from the Prologue
About the Princesse:
For custume she had a special zest,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clear
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk to eat,
She reached a hand seductively for the meat.

About the Doctor:
Yet he was rather close as to expenses
And kept gold he was in possession.
Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.
He therefore had a special love of gold.

About the Summoner:
There was a Summoner with us at that inn,
Himself on fire, like a cheshire.
For he had ruffled ears. His eyes were narrow,
He was as hot and fleshy as a squaw
Black scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.
Children were afraid when he appeared.

from The Pardoner's Tale
There is, in Lucian's long relation
Concerning parricide and its operations,
Trust me, no glistering action to be traced
We at least two victims suffered at their end,
Thus these two murderers received their due,
So did the wretched young poacher too.

from The Wife of Bath's Tale
Others meet we women find it sweet
When we are thought dependable, discreet
And, secret, firm of purpose and controlled.
Better betsyng things that we are told.
But don't set worth the handle of a rake;
Women conceal a thing! For Hester's sake!
2. Medieval Manuscript Create your own manuscript page of a passage from "The Wife of Bath's Tale" or another tale by Chaucer. Include the text of the passage, an appropriate illustration, and a decorative border for the page. - ART

3. Costume Drawings Imagine a live performance of one of the tales. Find or draw pictures that show how the characters might be dressed. - ART

4. Woman's Roles Find out more about the roles of women in Chaucer’s day. Was the Wife of Bath representative of her sex? Did widows like her have more independence than married or single women? What was life like for noble women? For women affiliated with the church? Answer these questions in an oral report. - HISTORY

5. Medieval Justice The justice meted out in "The Wife of Bath’s Tale" may seem unusual by modern standards. Find out more about justice in medieval England. What influence did the monarch have over the courts of justice? What role did the church play in justice? What exactly is English common law?

What were trial by combat and trial by ordeal, and when did they cease to be used? How did the jury system evolve? How were lawyers trained? Research the answer to one of these questions or a related question, then share your findings in a written report. - HISTORY

Inquiry & Research

Bath The city of Bath in England (pictured below) has a history that dates back to Roman times. Research this city, the home of the Wife of Bath. Present your findings in an illustrated time line entitled "Bath Yesterday and Today."
Vocabulary in Action

**EXERCISE A: SYNONYMS** On your paper, write the word that is closest in meaning to the boldfaced word.

1. concede: follow, grant, start, end
2. statute: regulation, remark, area, sculpture
3. prowess: stress, talent, front, back
4. cosset: release, urge, indulge, intrude
5. implore: beget, beseech, believe, belittle
6. crone: murmur, wizard, hag, scream
7. abominably: awfully, trebly, unwisely, easily

**EXERCISE B: ANTONYMS** On your paper, write the word whose meaning is most nearly opposite the meaning of the boldfaced word.

1. tribulation: criticism, sorrow, peace, anger
2. bequeath: gain, argue, doubt, inherit
3. rebuke: praise, predict, question, answer
4. dejected: deprecating, elated, inserted, wise
5. temporal: harsh, timely, worldly, spiritual
6. ecstasy: misery, fury, confusion, bliss
7. contemptuous: proud, kind, new, respectful
8. maim: scar, scorn, infect, heal

**Building Vocabulary**

Several words to know in this lesson derive from Old or Middle English. For an in-depth study of word origins, see page 708.

Research and present a series of mock interviews with English men and women of Chaucer’s day. Begin by brainstorming a list of possible interviewees with the entire class. Consider the characters in the “Prologue” of *The Canterbury Tales* and the professions mentioned in the biographical information about Chaucer. Then get together with a partner and research one of the medieval people or lifestyles. Use your findings to prepare questions and discussion points for a mock interview in which one member of your pair takes on the role of interviewer and the other portrays a medieval person.

**Primary Print Source** Consider reading letters and diaries from the era, as well as more of *The Canterbury Tales*. A brief general survey of English literature, such as one found in an encyclopedia, might help you locate appropriate medieval sources.

**Secondary Print Source** Social histories, which focus on people’s daily lives, may prove to be valuable sources. Biographies of Chaucer and other people of his day should also be useful. Consider books that combine biography and social history, such as John Gardner’s *The Life and Times of Chaucer*.

**Web Sites** Search for the Web sites of Chaucer and Middle English societies, medieval museums, and British castles. Also use the Web to locate medieval studies departments at British and American universities.

More Online: Research Stater
www.mcdougallittel.com

UNIT ONE  AUTHOR STUDY: GEOFFREY CHAUCER