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**Annotations to The Wife of Bath section in Chaucer’s *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales***

* Note the word “ride” of *The Prologue* in line 27, “That towards Canterbury meant to ride.”
* Note the word “apparel” of *The Prologue* in line 40, “And what apparel they were riding in;”
* Both the words taken together lend us useful insight into the description of the Wife of Bath, whose accomplishment was that of making clothes. She also rode an “ambling horse” and has travelled far and wide. The Ellesmere manuscript illustration clearly shows that the Wife of Bath is riding astride.\* Compare and contrast the military prowess of the Knight to faraway places with that of the Wife of Bath’s “passing over” and “wandering by the way.” No doubt Chaucer stresses on the frivolous nature of the Wife of Bath. The fact that the Knight was not “gaily dressed” but had “fine horses” points toward his nobility and virtuousness. The Wife of Bath can laugh and joke in company and have complete knowledge of the remedies of love. This trait of her character seems trivial like that of the Squire, the son of the Knight. The Squire could write songs, recite poems, joust, dance, draw and write. The Squire’s courteous nature and the flippancy of the Wife of Bath, looks strange when seen against the sovereignty of the Knight and simplicity of the Oxford Cleric.
* The extravagance of her clothing is as much heightened by reference to her kerchiefs, hoes, shoes and above all the “medieval ridding leggings” pulled up loosely and largely about her hips as the ironical largeness of her heart is being suggested by reference to the fact that she had five husbands. As Stewart Justman has pointed out in his article, “Trade as Pudendum: Chaucer’s Wife of Bath” (*The Chaucer Review,* Vol. 28, No. 4) that in her (The Wife of Bath) Chaucer “pictures the folly of bourgeoisie – its appetite for goods both social and economic – as the ancestral license of woman”. For as Justman points out that the “vigour of the towns, their commercial character, their challenge to traditional relations: all this is legible in the Wife.” This becomes clear when we come across the description of the Friar in the General Prologue. The Friar was forthcoming in giving penance to those who would offer him money (silver). For he knew that nothing good can come out of commerce with “slum-and-gutter dwellers”. He was courteous to rich men where he knew that he would gain profit. The short description of the Merchant and the Manciple is also a case in point. Similarly the phrase “guild-fraternity” is important when the narrator describes the men of profession like the *Haberdasher, Dyer, Carpenter, Weaver, Carpet-maker*.Quite interestingly the Wife of Bath is called a “good wife”, a “worthy woman” who came from beside the Bath city. In the Wife of Bath’s Tale, that is The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, she defends her marriages by telling that “God bade us all to wax and multiply.” As she tells in her Prologue:

No word of what the number was to be,

Then why not marry two or even eight? (The Wife of Bath’s Prologue)

She cites the names of King Solomon, Lamech, Abraham, Jacob as having many wives and therefore vehemently enquires upon a time or text wherein God disparage and prohibits marriages. She therefore willfully asserts:

Blessed be God that I have wedded five!

Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears.

I can’t keep continent for years and years. (The Wife of Bath’s Prologue)

* The brief sketch of her in the General Prologue conveys to us an impression of an energetic, full blooded, highly sociable, and self-assertive woman.
* The General Prologue draws on the materials of satire. Satire is the holding up to ridicule of folly and vice, and medieval satire attacked its victims harshly. But Chaucer uses a different approach, partly drawn from the thirteenth-century French *Roman de la Rose*, an encyclopaedic narrative work, the beginning of which he had translated as *The Romaunt of Rose*. Chaucer develops a technique of ironical praise. This is apparent in the description of the Wife of Bath. The fact that she had married five husbands at the church door and she had visited one of the holiest places in the world –Jerusalem – three times is a case in point. The instance of ironical praise can also be noticed in the description of the Nun, her counterfeiting a courtly kind of grace and the reference to her tender heart. One may also cite the instance of the Monk who had many dainty horses in his stable and ignored the old book of rules and adopted the whims and fancies of the modern world. The Monk’s hobby of hunting like the charity of the Nun is an instance of ironical praise.
* Compare the extravagance of the Kerchiefs of the Wife of Bath, the shining silver medal of St Christopher of the Yeoman, the coral trinket and golden brooch of the Nun, the fine grey fur and the fashionable pin of the Monkwith the simplicity of the fustian tunic of the Knight.
* Compare the physical description of the Monk and the Summoner with that of the Wife of Bath. Here, I am giving the description of The Monk:

He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;

Into a lover’s knot it seemed to pass.

His head was bald and shone like looking-glass;

So did his face, as if it had been greased.

He was a fat and personable priest; (The Monk)

With regard to the Wife of Bath, the narrator tells,

Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.

A worthy woman all her life, ….

When the description of The Wife of Bath is read against that of the Monk or the Pardoner, her shortcomings appear less beside their vices. Moreover the hat of the Wife of Bath shaped like a buckler or shield is an ironic reminder of the Yeoman’s bow-string, shield and sword.

* Comparison should also be made between the places the Wife of Bath visited (like Rome, Boulogne among others) with the places the other pilgrims have travelled. One example is the Skipper’s knowledge of places like Gottland, Cape of Finisterre.

\*The Ellesmere manuscript illustration.

