



**Marion Turner.** *The Wife of Bath: A Biography.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 320 pp. ISBN 9780691206011. \$29.95 hardback.

“[Geoffrey Chaucer’s] *Wife of Bath* is the first ordinary woman in English literature,” Turner declares, before going on to explore her extraordinary originality and impact on writers in the six hundred years since her creation. The book falls into two halves: Part I puts the *Wife* in her original literary and historical contexts, while Part II chronicles her literary afterlife. Turner’s last book, *Chaucer: A European Life* (2019) was a hefty volume that repeatedly demonstrated the value of sensitively reconstructing Chaucer’s life and world to generate a better understanding of his fictions. This book is aimed at a more general audience and wears its learning more lightly, but again it draws on a wealth of reading and research. In Part I, chapters are devoted to the portrayal of literary character and what was at stake in presenting a female storyteller; medieval women’s work and travel; and the marriage market. In Part II, we range from the *Wife*’s early reception by scribes, to overt adaptations of her story in plays, ballads, and novels, and her less obvious influence on figures such as William Shakespeare’s Falstaff and James Joyce’s Molly Bloom.

Turner does an excellent job of delineating the ways in which the *Wife of Bath* is a distinctive and radical creation. Before Chaucer, women’s voices had been heard

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in fiction, but they were mostly those of noblewomen elegantly lamenting their suffering, not those of women like her: funny, middle aged, and middle class. Chaucer borrowed a great deal from La Vieille in *Le Roman de la Rose* for the Wife's discussions of love and sex, but crucially La Vieille is a sex worker, and thus outside conventional social norms. The Wife is a married woman and churchgoer, at the center of her well realized contemporary English world. In her Prologue, the Wife retells an exemplum of a lion pointing out the artistic bias in men's painting of lions that Chaucer took from Aesop, probably via a Latin school text by Avianus. But, as Turner explains, he gave it a distinctive twist, turning it into an analogy for the biased misogyny of clerical writing about women. Turner also shows that the attitudes towards remarriage that the Wife challenges were not current orthodoxies, but old-fashioned clerical prejudices at odds with contemporary practice. So Chaucer could have been confident that his audience sympathized with much of the Wife's debunking of anti-marriage discourse.

Turner's book is full of interesting historical nuggets and literary insights. The Wife of Bath is famous for ripping up her husband Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves,"<sup>1</sup> but I had not previously encountered Christine de Pizan's account of how, conversely, a husband was incited to violence against his wife by reading the antifeminist claims of the *Roman de la Rose*. Similarly, the significance for the *Canterbury Tales* of the Miller disruptively insisting on telling the second Tale, thereby displacing the Monk, is a mainstay of undergraduate lectures. But Turner reminds us that the Wife, too, was probably first envisaged as an interrupter, replacing the Parson, and is repeatedly interrupted herself by male clerics. In the early chapters of the book there are also many stories of medieval women whose lives have suggestive parallels with the Wife. The speedy remarriage of Chaucer's own widowed mother and the multiple marriages of Katherine Neville, the daughter of Chaucer's niece, both help to show that the Wife's five marriages were unexceptional. The sketch of Matilda Penne, a London skinner, gives us an intriguing picture of a businesswomen who would have been the Wife's real life contemporary.

Following Turner's introduction in her chapter on "The Wandering Woman," readers may be inspired to seek out the story of the adventurous travels of the twelfth-century Margaret of Beverley in the Holy Land, originally narrated in the first person in Latin verse. However, many of the extraordinary literary versions and descendants

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; repr. 2008), 105-121, l. 685.

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of the Wife of Bath described in Part II of the book sound less appealing. Voltaire's version of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* manages to turn the story, which Chaucer had centered—however problematically—on women's sovereignty, into a celebration of how the virile man can have sex with any woman, even one as repulsive as the Loathly Lady, now described in lavish misogynistic detail. On the other hand, the links Turner describes between Chaucer's Wife and Joyce's Molly Bloom reveal a deep artistic sympathy across the centuries.

I was initially skeptical of the claim, which Turner elaborates from Harold Bloom, that Shakespeare's Falstaff was inspired by the Wife. But the discussion here of their vital, challenging irreverence combined with carnality, garrulousness, self-awareness, and the occasional touch of sentimentality largely won me over. In Part II several other early modern adaptations are discussed. Robert Greene was the probable author of *The Cobbler of Canterbury* (1590), a collection of tales told by six passengers on a barge from London to Kent, and as Turner says, it is striking that for Greene "having an old wife telling a tale was the defining aspect of the *Canterbury Tales*" (168). *The Wanton Wife of Bath* was a ballad version, printed in 1600 and 1632, which led to fines and imprisonments for its printers and a decree that all copies should be burned. The charge laid against the ballad was that it was "disorderly," and what seems likely to have caused offence was the way the Wife interacted with biblical authority, which in the ballad version is newly personified. Biblical figures, from Adam to Mary Magdalen, line up to tell the Wife that she is not welcome in heaven, and she retaliates by confronting each worthy character with their own sins, until Christ forgives and accepts her. Understandably, this was seen as taking a little too much creative license with the Bible. Still, despite the authorities' best efforts, the ballad survives in fifty-four separate printings. Conversely, John Gay's play *The Wife of Bath* was a box office flop both in 1713 and on its revival in 1730. Objections to the Wife came from several directions: Alexander Pope was less concerned with her disorderliness, and more with the scandalous presentation of her marriages. In his version of the story, he raises her age at first marriage from twelve to fifteen and rewrites the account of her marital finances. This done, and various references to genitals and virginity cut, Pope, unlike John Dryden, was happy to retell her tale.

There is a great deal of detail in this book, and occasionally it felt more incidental than illuminating. I was not sure why we were given two pages of analysis of a poster for a 1976 Polish play of the *Canterbury Tales*, but nothing on the—perhaps

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lost?—play itself. Heloise, twelfth-century intellectual and opponent of marriage, is interesting in her own right, but I was less convinced that the space devoted to her life and writings helped me to understand the figure of the Wife. Material on grand political noblewomen of the fifteenth century, their political work and patronage, similarly felt only marginally relevant, and the minute details of, for example, the family history of Margaret Stodeye, daughter of an influential London merchant, was at times hard to engage with. In general, though, Turner’s work to reconstruct the Wife’s social historical context, and refusal to read her as a purely literary creation, is one of the strengths of the book.

One consequence of the wide range of topics discussed is that some are less confidently handled. For example, Turner is wrong to state that medieval English widows received the dowries their natal families had paid to their husbands. It is hard to understand the claim that Thomas Chaucer and Joan Beaufort, born at least a decade apart, were children together. And at times the case is overstated, or the evidence simplified, in ways that may serve the interests of a general reader but can irritate the specialist. It is by no means clear exactly what role Margery Kempe had in the writing of her *Book*, but Turner asserts that it was “dictated” (104). Though Turner interprets ornate clasps on books as signs of regular reading, psalters and other religious books are just as likely to have been ornately bound because of their status as devotional objects or because they were signifiers of wealth. And if Christine de Pizan did not read English, in what sense can we meaningfully consider her to have known of Chaucer’s work?

Also inconvenient for the specialist are the sparse footnotes, making it impossible to follow up interesting mentions of Jean Froissart, Kempe, and Joyce. Copy editing does not reach the high standard you would expect from an academic press, with “La Vieille” persistently misspelled, minor errors of punctuation throughout, and paragraphs that regularly extend beyond a page. The approach to glossing Middle English, and to giving the original language when French and Latin are quoted in translation, seems to change from chapter to chapter.

Perhaps in line with the book’s populist framing, there is a mixture of talking Chaucer up as a radical, gesturing towards modern liberal orthodoxies, and passing over larger social changes, which can lead to some odd stances. Claiming that Chaucer “asserted the importance of listening to marginal voices” (234) and positioning him among immigrants sits uncomfortably with the fact that some of his poetry—in

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keeping with the culture to which he belonged—is pointedly antisemitic and Islamophobic. Meanwhile, Turner attributes the “surprising” change in attitude to the Wife from Voltaire to twentieth-century fiction to a move into the novel genre. Emphasizing this rather than the huge historic shift in the status of women seems eccentric. However, there is much to enjoy in this lively book, whether your primary interest is Chaucer’s creative achievement, the Wife of Bath’s literary afterlife, or the lives of historical women that Turner painstakingly documents.

*Cathy Hume*  
*University of Bristol*