

The Wife of Bath: A Biography

Marion Turner

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Chaucer scholar Marion Turner's experimental work of literary criticism charts a character's lasting influence on international culture.

A character in Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath (or Alison) has been lauded, vilified, and beloved for her earthy independence. Turner calls Alison "the first ordinary woman in English literature": one who works, lusts, and jokes around. Employing historical research and keen analysis, her book investigates where this woman came from, and where, how, and why she becomes a "bookrunner" (a character who escapes her own text).

The major social and political event of Chaucer's time, the Black Plague, is shown to have been an instrument of demographic change that, to some extent, liberated European women and working people from feudal strictures and social patterns. And while Alison was a first in English literature, her economic power and independence reflected a new reality shared by many working English women of the time.

Using multiple lenses and a cross-cultural approach to examine Alison's treatment through time, Turner shows how reactions to Alison both defied and reflected norms, from those of aghast morality police to those of twentieth-century critics of British colonialism. She uses feminist analysis to identify how attitudes toward Alison's independence track with the eternal battle over women's rights. Just as diversity strengthens any system, Turner's transdisciplinary practice and Alison's innate complexity bolster the Wife of Bath's apparent immunity to any lasting censorship.

The woman Chaucer created lives on, continuing to capture imaginations with her bawdy self-confidence. Written in elegant, accessible prose, *The Wife of Bath* reinvents literary criticism to tell the extraordinary story of one of English literature's most memorable, norm-busting characters.

MICHELE SHARPE (January / February 2023)

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