“The Wife of Bath”

The Wife of Bath is one of the several pilgrims going to Canterbury. She is introduced in the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. The only piece of information the reader can have from the title is that she comes from Bath. He or she also understands her social status from the world wife.

The woman’s characterisation is built up resorting to different aspects of her personality. In the present paragraph I’m going to illustrate the ways the narrator exploits in order to bring the woman to surfaces.   
The first reference plays on irony since Geoffrey Chaucer immediately informs the reader that she is “somewhat deaf”. He also tells about her origin: she comes from Bath, or the near about, and beside he praises her skills in clothes making. He also adds that she could compete with the dressmakers from “Ypres and Ghent”, two important towns famous for their clothes and materials. The language he used relies on a rhyme scheme that ties lines together that is the rhymy couplet. The reader’s attention is immediately drawn by the narrator’s choice of the typical incipit of fables when he says “there was”. Also he exploits world order deviation when he says “at making clothes she had a skillful hand” because this is not the ordinary world order. In this way the stressed part of the line is “had a skillful hand” which rimes with “Ghent”. On a second moment the narrator indirectly underlines her ambition and vanity: he tells the reader that nobody in all the parish dared to go and proceed there in the offerings because if somebody did so she would immediately get angry. Such behaviour shows the woman was not really interested in charity but she rather enjoyed always to be in the part or on the stage. The characterisation proceeds with reference to the way she dressed and the narrator focuses the reader’s attention on two aspects overdressing stile: the first one (“her head-dresses were of finest wave and ground”) highlights the fine qualities of her style of wearing but immediately after worlds he parodies it because inform that “they weighed about ten pound”. Further more he makes it loud and clear that she used to doing this on Sundays that is on the day when she went to mass and this juglies that she wanted everybody to look at her. In a way or another the narrator’s judgement unveil the double-nature of the woman’s behaviour. Also when the narrator describes the stockings she would wear the dresses on the colour red: the finest scarlet red makes the effect exaggerated and therefore ridiculous. The colour is an additional way to underline that whatever the woman did was in excess and therefore once again the narrator wants to convey at rather critical point of view about the woman to whom he always refers with the noun “the Wife of”. The intelligent reader wonders why a married woman should choose a dressing style just for the pleasure to focus everybody’s attention on her in the style of today’s veline. Probably she was more interested in attract man’s attention than in any other possible matter. The idea is immediately confirmed by the narrator’s description of the way she wore her stockings which he says were “tightly fastened”. He also insists on the money she used to spend on her physical appearance which make the lady daring and rich. This allows the intelligent reader to understand that the narrator sets the character among the merchants in the middle class, one that had risen consistently in the period.

Again the narrator plays on the woman’s personality in line 460 since he speaks of her as of a “bold” and “fair” and, and this is again the point of irony “red of hue”.  
The wife of Bath is a woman of excess even in marriage since she has had already five husband. The narrator parodies the figure of the woman when he says “She had been respectable throughout her life” and even when he tells the reader than all her weddings had been religious ones(“married in church”). He seems to suggest that as a man there is high risk to court her. Irony is underline also when the narrator reinforces the woman’s worldly attitude adding “not counting other company in youth”. The narrator concludes his considerations about the wife’s reputation saying that the is not even need to discuss about her behaviour.

The characterisation makes now reference to the woman’s passion for travelling: she seems to be continually moving around the world. Considered that she has been in Jerusalem, Rome, Boulogne, Santiago and Cologne, all places connected to the idea of religion in that there are all site of pilgrimage. But no such spiritual bent comes out of Chaucer’s lines as for the wife’s spirituality and therefore the intelligent reader may rightly suppose she has exchanged religious sites for touristic resorts. The insistence in cataloguing pilgrimage sites adds to the narrator’s irony because it sounds rather improbable that a still young woman of the period could have visited all those places.

The wife’s desire to talk and to talk with man in particular comes immediately to surface at line 469 when the narrator plays on her pleasure to tell of her wondering.

The narrator does not hide the double-faced nature of the woman’s behaviour since he metaphorically parodies the way she sits on a horse. She looks more as a trophy. In addition the narrator focuses the reader’s attention on her exaggerated style of dressing even on a horse. He seems to ridicule the woman openly in lines 472-473 once again reinforcing the idea he had hinted at line 470 focusing on her being “gap-toothed”.

The characterisation ends highlighting all of the woman’s wise attitude of giving advice on love matters and the conclusion sticks in the intelligent reader’s mind because Chaucer plays on repetitive double senses to let the reader know the Wife of Bath is not at all the respectable woman she professed to be.

After a careful reading activity of the Wife’s of Bath characterisation one can rightly assert that in order to make the character memorable the poet plays with different literary devices that range from the intentional use of the rhymy couplet to the use of a metaphorical language to indirectly unveil aspects of the woman’s personality that were not openly accepted during the Middle Ages. Indeed the Wife of Bath seems to exhibit all the features that would make men be afraid of woman with straight forward manners.   
In Chaucer’s opinion such a woman from Bath was clearly an object of desire that he rather portraits as a toy of pleasure.

Surely she did not at all represent the kind of woman approved of by the mentality of the time: her “gap-toothed” quality, her “buttocks large”, her skill in the “old dance” make her a memorable character.