Reading guide/study questions – The General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* and *the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*

You are now entering my favorite territory: Middle English literature. I became a medievalist because I read Chaucer as an undergraduate. I used to read *The Miller’s Tale* aloud to my friends (and they’re still my friends). This is our one text this term that was originally written in English – although you’ll find that Middle English is NOT the English of today. I could give you chapter and verse on how that happened, but read Beidler, pp 28 – 41 for a good linguistic analysis.

Simple outline: *Old English* is the first written English that was written down, not by the Anglo-Saxons themselves but rather the Christian missionaries who arrived and used their familiar Latin alphabet to *transliterate* the sounds they heard the Anglos-Saxons make in their speech. Old English is the language of English from 500 to about 1100 CE. *Middle English* is the English that’s deeply affected by the Norman Conquest – much Frenchified and very different from the Germanic Old English. Middle English runs until about 1500; then we get Modern English which is, for instance, the language of Shakespeare.

Pages 89 to 114 in our text provide a good history recounting how *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* got into our hands.

You might enjoy this [video version](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mj98zBmZpEo) of Chaucer’s tales. You can find The Wife of Bath and her tale beginning at 17’51”.

[Prof Michael Murphy of CUNY](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/webcore/murphy/canterbury/), whose profile I tried to find online and failed, made a big difference with his renditions of Chaucer. Among Chaucerians, he’s controversial – that might be why I couldn’t find his profile. *If*  you’re planning to be a professional Chaucerian, you’ll need to know more than Murphy’s text. But for our purposes, Murphy is fine (and free). DO BE AWARE of textual controversies that Murphy smooths out; Beidler provides another view into this text.

Thank you for visiting my territory.