



GCE English Literature

Paper 1: Poetry

Section B: Specified Poetry Pre- or Post-1900

Full Mark Chaucer Responses

Summer 2017

Exemplars – Commentaries

Chaucer: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

Question 6

"Explore how marriage is presented in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, by referring to lines 35–58 and one other extract of similar length. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors."

Key words: marriage, presented, relevant contextual factors

Script 1

Paragraph 1: The topic is addressed directly from the outset. The succinct but telling link to contemporary discussions of the role of women is paired with awareness of the ways Chaucer explores 'the private aspects of marriage comedically through the unblushing, frank voice of the Wife of Bath'.

Paragraph 2 develops this by exploring the way the Wife talks about sexual relations. Textual support and close reference are present throughout, along with apt contextual reference to the fabliaux genre. The exploration of the text is detailed and sophisticated, including critical evaluation of the likely effect on Chaucer's original audience of 'the Wife's energetic, outrageous exclamations'. The discussion of the Wife's portrait shows awareness of possible ambiguities in the text and considers alternative views that see her as 'proto-feminist' or as stereotypical 'old bawd' or 'lusty Eve'. Throughout there is subtle analysis of Chaucer's tone: 'The honest aside "for sothe" again suggests the Wife is almost using a confessional tone to describe her lust in marriage yet her critical self awareness of her own moral lapses are so honestly frank the Wife seems almost ludicrous in her unbounded lustiness.' This is placed within the context of the 'hypocrisy of the church' in its attitudes to relations between the sexes and neatly linked to the Wife's frequent use of religious language and Biblical examples and her presence in a pilgrimage. Although the paragraph is over-long, the argument is tightly controlled throughout.

Paragraph 3 continues the argument by exploring how in both passages Chaucer 'reveals the reality and practical necessity of marriage'. The candidate does not shy away from expressing a personal viewpoint, but only after presenting detailed evidence: 'I personally believe that the first benefit ["my profit"] holds more weight for the Wife, who being a woman of the C14th had restricted opportunities to work and earn money.' This is followed by subtle consideration of the significance of the lines about how 'free' she is 'to wed' and how far this was likely to be 'a business transaction'. Her use of Biblical precedents is set in the context of the ways the men on the pilgrimage use such authorities in support of their 'misogynistic generic pictures of all women.'

Paragraph 4 brings the response to a neat conclusion by making a final point about the Wife's account being a way for Chaucer to 'absolve himself from blame by layering different and contradictory opinions on themes such as marriage to provoke thought among his audience'.

This is a carefully argued and persuasive critical response to the question. The use of both terminology and text is sophisticated. Attention to the poem takes first place and there is subtle evaluation of the role of Chaucer, all placed firmly in the 14th Century context. The essay meets all the requirements of Level 5 for each assessment objective and completely justifies the award of full marks.

Script 2

Paragraph 1: The response opens effectively by directly addressing the question and indicating briefly how the Wife's words 'preach her views on marriage' and she 'subverts the traditional view of medieval marriage'.

Paragraph 2 deals with the Wife's use of the scriptures to support her attitude to marriage and her succession of husbands. The candidate places securely this within scholarly arguments of the time and the techniques of 'male glossators', showing how the Wife's own arguments conveniently skate over aspects such as the unhappy results of 'Salomon's' multiple marriages. Noting that, as a widow, the Wife would have had 'more autonomy' than wives, the candidate explores the way she is able to confidently use St Paul's words of to justify her choice of marriage over celibacy or 'sinne'. This is accompanied by close reading of the text to illustrate the ways 'the Wife embed[s] her voice within a phallogentric discourse' to align Biblical authorities to her own experience and subtly expose hypocrisy.

Paragraph 3 explore the wife's forthright attitude to sexual relations. Describing her words as a kind of 'anti-sermon', this continues to place them within the religious and social context of the time, with embedded quotations and apt contextual reference. The 'unorthodox' nature of her emphasis on her enjoyment of sex and insistence that her husbands pay their 'conjugal debt' is made clear.

Paragraph 4 moves to the second extract, towards the end of *Tale* itself. The Old Hag's offer of the choice of 'yong and fair' or 'foul and old', with their attendant consequences, is read within the Medieval context. The candidate subtly explores the extent to which the *Tale* 'caters to the very stereotype of women that she seeks to destroy' in her *Prologue*.

Paragraph 5 expands on the Wife's presentation of marriage and 'her desire for power over the husband'. There is detailed contextual material linked clearly to her forthright rejection of male authority, 'phallogentric discourse' and insistence on chastity.

Paragraph 6 links this to the second extract and the ways Chaucer presents the choice offered to the Knight by his new wife. The text is again explored in close and subtle detail. The argument recognises the 'problematic' nature of the way the conclusion to the *Tale* presents marriage.

Paragraph 7 concludes the response by arguing that ultimately the Wife reduces marriage to 'nothing more than a loveless, economic weapon'.

This is an assured and sophisticated response, based on close textual knowledge and exploration as well as substantial contextual support. At times the extent of the material on Medieval discussion of marriage (for example in paragraph 5) is in danger of overwhelming the exploration of the text but this is balanced by regular reference to the details of the poem. Some readers might quibble with the suggestion in the conclusion that the Wife's desire for 'maistrie' is 'the wrong intention' but the argument has been set out cogently throughout.

This is a secure Level 5 answer which satisfies all the criteria and is worth full marks. Taken alongside the other example it illustrates that there are different ways to address the same topic with success.