

Chaucer

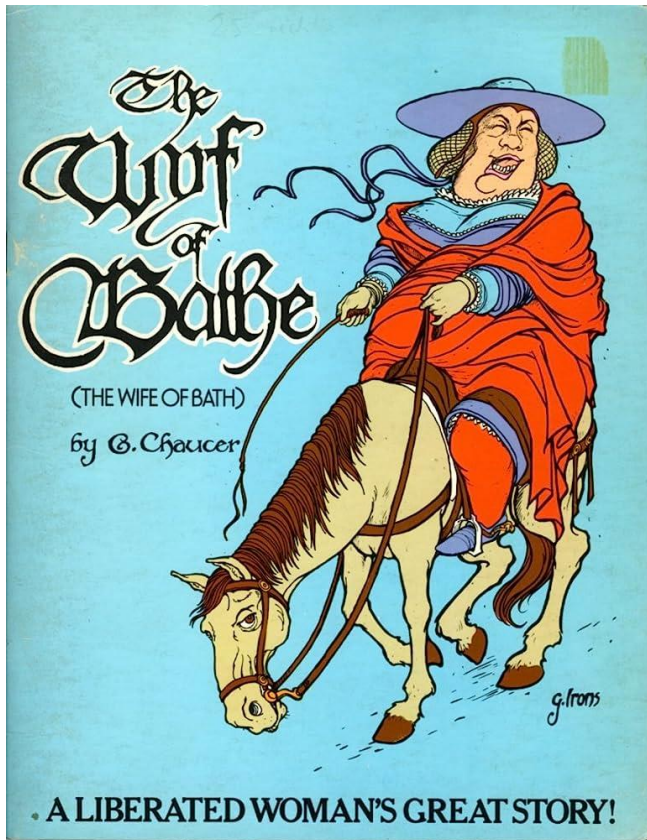
For several years at Virginia Commonwealth University, I taught a sophomore Survey of Western Literature. Such a course can only sample the gems of the western world's literature. In the first semester, we began with a smattering of the Old Testament, progressed rapidly through Egyptian, Greek, and Roman masterpieces, wiggled quickly through the Middle Ages over Europe, hit a highlight or two of Renaissance works, peeked at Shakespeare, and ended the semester with a bit of Milton.

I was especially frustrated with the selections from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Some of my favorite stories were not even mentioned. Following my first teaching of the course, I thought hard about what I could do to keep Chaucer from seeming such a negligible contribution to English literature. A teaching tool which had arisen since I had been a student involved the use of groups of students to make independent reports on segments of a subject. By the time Chaucer came up, the class had generally found a kind of internal structure in which several students appeared to be working together. I made use of those groups by assigning *Canterbury Tales* which did not appear in our text. In fact, all of the earthy fun and charm of Chaucer was lacking.

One of the students in this class was Margaret Cook whom I had taught in her freshman composition classes. She appeared to be a kind of maverick who generally sat alone and seldom interacted with any of the other students. She began in my composition classes as an inept writer who had little experience with standard English. She came frequently to my office for help, giving me a chance to get acquainted with her as she rapidly improved, taking advantage of her voluminous reading to improve her use of the English language. She was an apt student and I soon counted her among my best writers. By then I had learned something of her background. She was thirty-two, with a tempestuous life that she was eager to improve. She had withdrawn from her first composition class because she had not been able to get satisfactory help from the instructor. She had virtually no self-confidence and was about to give up her dream of a college education. She was supported by a rehabilitation scholarship which provided her with a minimal living allowance for her and her children. After an editorial in the student newspaper had commented on the theft of toilet paper from the restrooms, she confessed that she was occasionally guilty of taking partial rolls of tissue home, the only way she could find to make her meager income cover the necessities for her family. She had been shunned by the rest of the students in all of the classes; in the literature survey class her isolation was more obvious because it was a larger class than the composition classes and most of the class seemed to be acquainted with each other. She was older, unattractive, poorly dressed, and poorly groomed.

After I had assigned groups of three to six in the class to read and report to the class on several of Chaucer's *Tales*, Margaret requested that I remove her from a group of six; she felt she could work better if I allowed her to present her story alone. I assigned her the *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

On the first day of the group presentations, the class enjoyed several clever ways of handling the stories. One group which included several art students illustrated their summary of the *Miller's Tale* with cleverly drawn cartoons on large easel-size newsprint paper, making the story vivid even to those who would never read it. Other groups made original reports, including several scenes acted out as summaries of their tales.



I was intrigued with the more-bizarre-than-usual outfit Margaret had concocted for her one-woman report. She always looked as though she had been dressed from the proverbial missionary barrel, but that day she had topped any past costumes. When it was her turn, she strolled nonchalantly to the front of the class and sat casually on the edge of my desk, crossing her legs. She was wearing a colorful, short, tight skirt, a snug tee shirt, several bright, uncoordinated necklaces, and white lace hose rolled just below her somewhat plump knees. Her hair looked wilder than it usually did, a frizzy, partially-grown-out, amateurish bleach job. She was chewing, with vigor, a large piece of gum all the while.

Smacking her lips and coyly ogling the class, she began an act that hypnotized the class, paraphrasing the Wife's lines in modern colloquial words. Her elevated, crooked little fingers reinforced her declaration of eating daintily without dropping food on herself. Her spectators suddenly became aware of a large stain or two on her tee shirt. It was a stellar performance, embodying all of Chaucer's satire of the voluble Wife.

The class greeted her act with enthusiastic applause and, in the few minutes before we adjourned, flocked about her to talk about the Wife of Bath. Their recognition of her outstanding performance extended into subsequent classes as she became sought after and cultivated as a now-acceptable member of the class. Several times I saw her about the campus with one or another of her classmates. It was good to see how she relaxed and appeared happier as she continued her quiet excellence in her school work. I was glad when she reappeared in the second semester of the course, happily joining in conversation with her friends in the class.

Margaret graduated two years later, summa cum laude. In her standard black graduation cap and gown, she was indistinguishable from the rest of the happy graduates. I've not heard from her since that triumphant day, but I am sure she has become a solid, contributing tax-paying citizen, and I am happy to think that I might have helped. Maybe she has developed her natural talent as an actor, as she showed so well when she portrayed Chaucer's Wife of Bath.