**MARRIAGE** – WIFE OF BATH AND WHITE DEVIL

THE WIFE OF BATH:

* Marriage in this era was primarily a political alliance between families
* Although the wife says there is "wo in marriage" her prologue defends marriage, one reason being because she can have sex in marriage
* The Wife says she does not envy virginity and having sex in marriage is what god wants
* The Wife is a **nymphomaniac** (uncontrollable or excessive sexual desire in women). Some critics argue that Alison is addicted to sex. She asks what use is a man if "he ne used his sely instrument?" Here she is reducing men to their sexual organs suggesting she only sees them as sexual objects.
* Sex not only secures money and land for the Wife of Bath, it also gives her power. The Wife explains that when she wanted something from her husband she would refuse to give him sex. By withholding sex, the Wife ensures that they will give her payment, whenever she wants it.
* The Wife argues, from scripture and experience, that marriage is no bad thing and that successive marriages for those who are widowed are perfectly in order.
* The wife notes Biblical examples for polygamy such as with Abraham and Jacob and Solomon (who had 700 wives). Scripture, she says, give no fast ruling on the matter of how many spouses we should have.
* The Wife is prepared to use marriage to secure material wealth and establish her own social status. Her first 4 husbands are wealthy so when she marries Jankin she is sufficiently wealthy no longer needing to seek material gain from the liaison.
* She desires sovereinetee or maistire in her marriages
* In the Tale the universal concurrence of the women of Arthur’s court is produced by the Wife as evidence that the desire for maistrie is not peculiar to her
* She also shown through Jankin and the Knight that husbands also seek maistrie
* The Wife resented the restrictions imposed on her by her husband. Her final agreement with Jankin is that she is free to come and go as long as the husbands honour is sustained. Flamineo tricks Camilo and advises him if he restricts his wife’s freedom it will inevitably drive her to having an affair. Both texts state that for a marriage to work there must be an element of trust but ironically Camillo is right not to trust
* The word “maistrie” itself is used three times in the prologue and tale
* The Wife agrees to marry Jankin even while her 4th husband is still alive, but she will only wed him when her husband has widowed. (perhaps similar to Vittoria who will only wed Brachiano if Camillo is killed)
* Alison states that suffering wives marry to gain status, yet ironically Chaucer reveals the opposite as it is the Wife’s behaviour that generates most of the ‘wo’ in her marriages.
* Marriage places restrictions of women as partners are often unequal so it is this patriarchal pressure that forces women to desperate measures of deception, violence and sex as a bargaining tool.
* The word maistrie itself is gendered showing it is a struggle faced by women in society
* It seems the dispute between Alison and Jankin is finally resolved through mutal need – he gives her soverayntee (supremacy) and she agrees to behave honourably towards him. Likewise the Old Hag is given sovereignty but in return she acts in the marriage to please him and obey him. (Flamineo tricks Camilo and advises him if he restricts his wife’s freedom it will inevitably drive her to having an affair. Both texts state that for a marriage to work there must be an element of trust but ironically Camillo is right not to trust)

THE WHITE DEVIL

* Camillo is probably married to Vittoria for love since Monticelso says he ‘received no dowry’. Camillo therefore comes across as a supped older man, taken in by an attractive, younger, impoverished woman. LINKS DIRECTLY TO THE WIFE OF BATH as Alison married her first four husbands as they were old and rich.
* Vittoria is a contrasting character to the Wife of Bath as she does not keep sex within marriage, but instead has an affair.
* Brachiano marries Isabella because she is the sister of a potential political foe and therefore the marriage beings political influence for him. Vittoria’s marriage furthers her families fragile position and suits the political ambitions of Camillo’s family. Vittoria and Brachiano’s mutual attraction therefore threatens their previous marriages where love was not present and so threatens political stability even before anything has happened in the play
* Vittoria’s dream – the yew-tree is symbolic of graveyards so could symbolise lawful marriage being destroyed

CONTEXT:

* Webster was no stranger to the extra-marital sex that appears in his works. His first child was born only two months after his marriage to Sara Peniall in 1606.
* James refused to allow divorcees to remarry
* Chaucer may have taken inspiration from Boccaccio’s ‘The Decameron’, written in the same era, as much of its erotic and satirical portrayals of love is mirrored by the Wife
* In the fourteenth century, sex was considered a marital “dette” which the husband should pay to his wife

Dena Goldberg – “Vittoria is the victim of a marriage arranged by her family in a futile effort to reverse the trend of economic decline initiated by a spendthrift father”

CHRISTINE TUCKER - ‘Wife transforms sex into a debt which her husbands should give into a device which she uses to manipulate and benefit from her husbands’. “her greatest unhappiness comes in moments when her power or maistre is being threatened”

CAROLYN DINSHAW – the Wife is “enacting an antifeminist stereotype of the greedy, insatiable, domineering wife”