**The portrait of the Wife of Bath**

*Every character in ‘The Canterbury Tales’ is described in a short ‘portrait’ at the start of the work, before they launch into their tales. There is a first-person narrator who is also on the pilgrimage, often known as Chaucer-the-Pilgrim (as opposed to Chaucer-the-Poet). Unlike Chaucer-the-Poet, Chaucer-the-Pilgrim is a rather naïve character, who believes everything the other pilgrims tell him and takes them all at face-value. Incidentally, he tells the worst tale of all and can’t even cope with the rhyming couplets!*

*We therefore need to read the portraits very carefully, reading between the lines to detect what Chaucer-the-Poet is actually telling us. Work through the following questions with this in mind.*

1. The first (and therefore structurally significant) thing we are told about the Wife is that she is ‘somdel deef’. What might it mean symbolically if someone is deaf? Could it hint at a character defect?
2. The Wife seems to be a brilliant weaver or cloth-maker, better than all the professionals (Ypres and Ghent were renowned centres for weaving). Should we take this claim at face-value? Whose word do we have for it?
3. What would you say is the Wife’s attitude to giving money for charity in church? (The people would all go up in a procession to give their offering.)
4. The Wife’s ruddy complexion is commented on. Go to <http://www.thescienceofpersonaldress.com/personology/5history.htm>

and note what this would tell a medieval audience about her personality.

1. How many of the 32 lines of the portrait are devoted to the Wife’s appearance? Why might this be significant?
2. Medieval travelling was difficult, dangerous and time-consuming (the short journey from London to Canterbury would have taken four to five days). What can we infer about the Wife from the enumeration (listing) of the Wife’s previous pilgrimages?
3. Considering what we are told about the Wife’s love-life, do you see anything ambiguous in line 23 (‘She koude muchel of wandringe by the weye’)?
4. The Wife’s hat is compared at the end of the portrait with a shield or an archery target. Comment on Chaucer’s choice of these two similes.