‘The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer
Behind the Scenes at the Museum by Kate Atkinson

Sources of humour

Humour exists in texts through a number of different means. Here are common sources of humour found in descriptions of marriage in Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’ and chapter ten of Behind the Scenes at the Museum:

**Wisecrack:** a clever, witty comment

**Parody:** twisting an original story into something humorous

**Irony:** when humour arises from a difference between the actual result of a series of events and the normally expected result

**Sarcasm:** saying the opposite of what you mean (often in a cutting or bitter tone as well as a humorous tone)

**Banter:** good natured dialogue

**Black humour:** when an element of something morbid or ghastly is combined with comedy

**Exaggeration:** when something is emphasised for comic effect

**Anecdote:** an amusing personal story

**Bawdy / crude humour or double entendre:** using words or phrases with sexual or inappropriate connotations

Task

Read the description of the wedding in chapter ten of Behind the Scenes at the Museum and the extract from ‘The Wife of Bath’ below. Answer the questions that follow.

5. List 5 different sources of humour found in both ‘The Wife of Bath’ and chapter ten of Behind the Scenes at the Museum, with quotations to support each.

4. Take 4 of your quotations, and analyse these to explain what is implied by the narrator, what tone is used and the effect on the reader.

3. List 3 themes that the two texts address in these extracts.

2. Make 1 comment about Atkinson and 1 comment about Chaucer to finish the following sentence: ‘The intention of the author here is to…’

1. Make 1 comment about how a modern audience might react differently to a medieval audience, to the extract from ‘The Wife of Bath’.
Extract from ‘The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, from The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer
(1994 Cambridge edition)

794: And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
795: And with his fest he smoot me on the heed,
796: That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
797: And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,
798: He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,
799: Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.
800: “O, hastow slain me, false theef?” I seyde,
801: “And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
802: Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.”
803: And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,
804: And seyde, “Deere suster Alisoun,
805: As help me God! I shal thee nevere smite.
806: That I have doon, it is thyself to wite.
807: Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke!”
808: And yet eftsoones I hitte hym on the cheke,
809: And seyde, “Theef, thus muchel am I wreke;
810: Now wol I die, I may no lenger speke.”
811: But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
812: We fille acorded by us selven two.
813: He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
814: To han the governance of hous and lond,
815: And of his tonge, and of his hond also;
816: And made him brenne hi s book anon right tho.
817: And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
818: By maistrie, al the soverainette,
819: And that he seyde, “Myn owene trewe wyf,
820: Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;
821: Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat” –
822: After that day we hadden never debaat.
823: God helpe me so, I was to him as kinde
824: As any wyf from denmark unto Inde,
825: And also trewe, and so was he to me.

Extension task

Identify the humour in Grace Nichols’ collection The Fat Black Woman’s Poems. How does this compare with the humour in either or both of the other texts?