

# Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale"

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# I. Plot Summary

## A. The Prologue

1. Unique in *The Canterbury Tales*, the introduction to the Wife of Bath's Tale is longer than the tale itself. She describes her own marriage in great detail. She sees nothing wrong with having had five husbands. To defend her position, the Wife refers to King Solomon, who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and to St. Paul's admonishment that it is better to marry than to burn.

2. The Wife of Bath's first three husbands were old, rich and willing to do what she said.
3. Her fourth husband had a mistress. She had him believe she was sleeping with another man so he would be jealous.
4. When the husband died, she married the good-looking Jankyn, twenty years her junior, who treated her like dirt.
5. He used to read her from a book that how women could not be trusted. She got so furious that ripped the pages out, and he hit her so hard that she went partially deaf. Thinking she was about to die, she made him swear to obey her every word.

## B. The Tale

1. A lusty young knight in King Arthur's court is sentenced to death for raping maid, but the queen will allow him to live if he can answer one question: what do women want?
2. On the knight's way back to the court, he suddenly sees 24 young maidens dancing and singing. The knight explains his quest to the hag who promises him the right answer if he will do what she demands.

3. He agrees and she tells him that women want mastery in marriage, which is an answer gladly accepted by the queen.
4. The old crone demands that knight marry her.
5. Knowing her young husband's anxiety on the wedding night, she offers him a choice: she can keep ugly and faithful, or turn beautiful but perhaps unfaithful.
6. Wisely, he leaves the choice up to her. This is the answer and right attitude. So, she is willing to remain beautiful and faithful.

## II. Characterization

### A. The Wife of Bath

The Wife's sexual being carries a similar freight of complex gender traits, compounding the conventionally masculine and feminine. By her own account, she is a blend of Venus and Mars (love and war, sex and violence). It is palpably obvious from the Wife's vigorous fight with her fifth husband, culminating in her feigned, farcically knockabout "death," that she is well able to wield her fists as well as her wits. She dominates her husbands in every way: physically, financially and legally.

## B. The First Three Husbands

Notice that the first three come across as a group rather than separate people, as “types,” rather than “individuals.” They all fall into the Wife’s category of rich, old and foolish husbands, and they are familiar literary type.

## C. The Last Two Husbands

The other two husbands are more individualized. One is a young gallant who requires more subtle handling from the Wife, and the other, her fifth husband, is an altogether stronger and more substantial character. Notice that when he is introduced, he has a name (Jankyn) and a specific occupation. None the less, for all the difference, all five husbands illustrate the same basic point. Rich or poor, old or young, stupid or clever, they are all examples of powerless husbands, men who the Wife finally succeeded in taming.



## D. The Knight and the Raped Maid in the Tale

The knight is simply a “lusty bachelor” and he rapes a maid, about whom we know nothing except that she is raped. Their significance lies not so much in what kind of people they are as in the ideas they represent. In this instance, as with the Wife’s husbands in her prologue, it is easiest to think of the knight and lady as elements in the Wife’s argument. It is a display of brutal male power.

## E. The Hag

The hag has no name and is not described in great detail (in other words, she is not an “individual”). None the less, she is the linchpin in the argument of sovereignty. It is she who gives the knight the correct answer, and in so doing she gains power over him. The approach to take is to regard all characters as elements in the Wife’s argument. They all have a contribution to make to our view of “women’s power.”

# III. Themes

## A. The Wife of Bath's Prologue

1. The Wife of Bath's prologue exhibits the fate of woman as a commodity to be bought and used in marriage, one whose economic and religious task was to pay the debt in a society where "all is for to selle" (420). In exchange for the sexual use of her body, her first three husbands give her economic security.

## 2. Feminist or anti-feminist?

Whether Chaucer's creation is feminist or anti-feminist in its effect: the test may seem a defence of women's rights, but the Wife embodies most of the faults for which medieval anti-feminist authors condemned women.

examples of anti-feminist:

- a. her view of virginity
- b. her reaction to the anti-feminist book

a. Her view of virginity

Virginity, which the Church glorifies, is not required of the Wife of Bath. She thinks that her body is given her to use. She has no wish to be a virgin and she does not accept the doctrine that a widow or a widower must not marry again. She is willing to admit, for convention's sake, that chastity is the ideal state. But it is not *her* ideal. In her heart, she despises virginity.

## b. Her reaction to the anti-feminist book

The Wife of Bath's reaction to the anti-feminist book is viewed as misogynists' stereotypes of women as aggressive and incapable of reasoning. Knowing her clerk-husband's readings an anti-feminist book of examples of wicked wives from history and legends, she is outraged and takes physical revenge by tearing the book and hitting him.

### 3. Act as a feminist

- a. Her physical reaction exemplifies precisely the faults anti-feminist claimed women had. However, this dramatizes women's dilemma in such a society: masculine control of culture and of the cultural image of women leaves women no place to reply within it.

b. The characteristics of the Wife of Bath (boldness, the capacity to argue, articulacy, sexual honesty, the desire for freedom and autonomy), which are regarded as faults in an age which required the ideal women to be restrained, passive, quiet, uninclined to sex, confined to the house, and obedient, are applauded by modern feminism.



## B. The Wife of Bath's Tale

1. The Wife of Bath's tale is constructed to be the programmatic opposite of the Clerk's Tale. It represents wifely dominance, or maistrye, just as the Clerk's tale is the counter-representation of wifely obedience.
2. The Wife of Bath's Tale is about transformation. An old hag becomes, through magic, young and beautiful; a nasty arrogant youth is turned, through a lecture by the hag, into a husband who takes other's wishes more into account.

3. The tale's own message (its lecture) for social transformation is that the rich should act with virtue, not arrogance, and the poor should see their state as a blessed opportunity for spiritual wellbeing.

4. Chaucer presents relations between the sexes as a mirror of social and political relationships. It starts with a rape, which is called an “oppressioun” (895); it ends with a resolution of conflict through the voluntary abnegation of rights.

(After winning a degree of “maistrye” (1242), the hag willingly becomes obedient to her husband.)

## C. Marriage as Business Transaction and Battleground

1. With an accusation that Jankyn has attempted to kill her for “my land,” the Wife inadvertently reveals her view of marriage as a purely business transaction, a mercenary alliance entered into for personal gain where love is irrelevancy. Perhaps at this moment Alison recognizes that as an elderly widow her main attraction is her wealth.

2. The fight between the Wife and Jankyn is a literal battle between the sexes. The Wife's actions are astonishing; she refuses to be cowed by the citation of these authorities. Instead her response is a refusal to be degraded or psychologically battered into submission. She literally strikes a blow for herself and for her sex too.

3. The Wife's depiction of a marital battleground and struggle for power is itself a damning indictment of medieval marriage.

4. Her response to a range of anti-feminist propaganda, attitudes instilled by the weight of written and verbal masculine authority, is to use violence in an attempt to destroy both the words (literally as she tears the pages of the book) and their effect.

5. Jankyn's preoccupation with his book symbolizes the division between them as man and woman. Jankyn has access to a knowledge that bestows power upon him as a male. It provides him with a wealth of authoritative material that he can wield as highly damaging weapon in the sex "war."

6. In contrast Alison, and all women whom on this occasion she represents, is denied that power in all its forms, and it is precisely this which renders so poignant her belief that women might write enough to rival any man's collection. She only wishes that she could strike back in the same way and write similar stories about men. Yet it is a futile hope, as well she knows, and she can only bewail the gulf between them.



## D. Experience versus Authority

1. The Wife's opening declaration is entirely unambiguous; she places *her* trust in "Experience" when it comes to any comment concerning the "wo that is in mariage," and this experience is a personal one. She thinks that she is able to pronounce with some authority on this subject for she herself has been married since she was twelve and "housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve."

2. When she asks why the fifth husband is not a legitimate one and how many the woman might be permitted to marry, she concludes that she has never, in all her life, heard anyone tell “Upon this nombre diffinicioun.” Her perspective *is* an alternative, that of lived “Experience.”

3. She states that “Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,” highlighting the fact that such authoritative interpretations of the Bible, or of any other written texts, are male-dominated.
  
4. The Wife’s understanding of biblical teaching may well be limited or partial. However, her very questioning of the masculine activity of exegetical authority is an extremely subversive act.

5. Women were certainly not allowed to participate in the process while ordinary people of either sex were denied access to this making of meaning. They were required instead to try and live their lives according to an ideal pronounced by someone else. Alison dares to speak as a woman and offers her own lived experience as an alternative to this authority.

6. She concludes with a simple question, “Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye?”. In effect she is saying that she too, an ignorant woman, has her own opinions formed by listening to others but also on the basis of practical day-to-day experience.

7. Alison demands to know why her perspective is any less powerful or “right” than any other, and in this way Chaucer offers his own challenge to notions of received authority as well as to the belief that the written word remained fixed as “truth.”

## E. Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in “The Wife of Bath”

1. Whatever sexual pleasure the Wife may enjoy, it has a considerable element of a masochism.
2. The Wife’s sexual practices with her fifth husband:

Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I telle.

God let his soule nevere come in helle.

And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe.

That feel I on my ribbes al by rewe,

And evere shall unto mine ending–day.

But in oure bed he was so fresshe and gay,

And therwithal so well koude he me glose,  
Whan that he wolde han my bele chose,  
That though he hadde me bet on every bon,  
He koude winne agayn my love anon.  
I trowe I loved him best for that he  
Was of his love daungerous to me. (503-14)

3. The Wife speaks lasting pain in her body that her husband inflicted. “But” in line 508 and “though” in line 511 imply that her husband could get away with beating her up because “in oure bed” he was a great lover. Male violence is not offset by good sex, but male violence and female pain are mutually constitutive elements of female desire.



4. Attraction to a “daungerous” man, the aloof, domineering, violent hero of any standard romance, is a “queynte fantasye” (516) that every woman shares and smart women understand: “This knoweth every womman that is wis” (524).
  
5. The allegedly intimate and stereotypically gendered connection between pleasure and danger, between (hetero) sexuality and violence is obvious, and it further entails the escalation of abuse, from a beating to a rape.

6. It is worth to applaud that the Wife stands up to Jankyn when he does what she falsely accused her first three husbands of doing: trying to control her transgressive behavior by preaching stock antifeminism.
  
7. The Wife of Bath's last physical battle and subsequent reconciliation with Jankyn provide a model of gender and heterosexual relations based on equality and mutuality.

## F. Sexual Economy in The Wife of Bath

1. The Wife of Bath belongs to the petty bourgeoisie; she is a small-time entrepreneur in the textile trade, which, already by the thirteenth century, had come to dominate the English economy and its international trade.
2. The Wife's marital history is that her sexuality is as capitalistic as her trade. For her, God's commandment 'to wax and multiplye' (28) bears fruit not in children, but in profit: marriage settlements and land inheritances from her husbands, together everything she can wring from them by nagging and manipulation.

3. The Wife's claims the profit motive as the basis for marital harmony:

But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,  
And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,  
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,  
But it were for my profit and myn ese? (211-14)

4. Her strategy in marriage is based on the economic principle of supply and demand:

Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;  
Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.  
With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;  
Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,  
And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys;  
This knoweth every womman that is wys. (519-24)

5. The Wife of Bath can inherit land and engage in business, but she has no control over the disposition of her body. Her first marriage to a rich but impotent old dotard at twelve only benefits her parents or guardians who have invested this choice of sexual capital for the sake of social standing and a profitable settlement.

6. The Wife of Bath has thoroughly internalised the economic function of the bourgeoisie in reducing quintessentially human activity-love and sexuality-to commercial enterprise. She understands that as a woman she is both merchant and commodity: her youth and beauty the initial capital investment, and her age—the depreciation of the commodity— a condition against which she must accumulate profit as rapidly as possible.

7. In fact, the Wife's alternatives were few and unattractive, for outside the convent there was little room in medieval Europe for the single woman. Religious, social and parental authority combined to urge acceptance of a profitable match. It is the Wife of Bath's triumph to have adapted with such success to the institutions of her day: to have found pleasure and even, towards the end of her life, some peace of mind.

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