

# The Wife of Bath's Tale

## from The Canterbury Tales

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 **Benchmarks** D.2.4.2, E.2.4.3  
**FCAT Benchmark** E.2.4.1

### Connect to Your Life

**Love and Marriage** You are probably familiar with the phrase “the battle of the sexes.” This expression suggests that romantic relationships have an aspect of conflict, in which one party attempts to gain the upper hand. What are your own opinions on the subject? Would you say that a good marriage is basically an equal partnership, or do you think that one person needs to be the decision maker? Explain your opinions in a class discussion.

### Build Background

**Romance and Chivalry** “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” belongs to the so-called Marriage Group of *The Canterbury Tales*, in which different pilgrims offer stories that express their philosophies of love and marriage. Set in the days of Britain’s legendary King Arthur, the story qualifies as a medieval **romance**—an adventure tale of knights and chivalry, in which the code of ideal knightly behavior (loyalty, faith, honor, and courtesy, especially to women) is stressed. In this story, however, a knight breaks the rules of chivalry and, as punishment, must undertake a quest.


#### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

abominably	implore
bequeath	maim
concede	prowess
contemptuous	rebuke
cosset	statute
crone	temporal
dejected	tribulation
ecstasy	

### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS NARRATOR** Whether a story is told in prose or verse, the **narrator** is the person or voice that tells the story. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the narrator of the “Prologue” introduces the characters who will serve as narrators of the tales that follow. Reread lines 455–486 of the “Prologue” (page 125), which introduce the Wife of Bath. Then try to predict the view of love and marriage that she might present in her tale.

**ACTIVE READING ANALYZING STRUCTURE** **Structure** is the way in which the parts of a literary work are put together. A **frame story** is a story that serves as a narrative setting or frame for one or more other stories. *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole has a frame structure, in which the story of the pilgrims serves as a frame within which the pilgrims tell their stories. The structure of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” features a main **plot** with several interruptions. For example, in the opening lines the Wife of Bath interrupts the main plot with a passage in which she criticizes friars. This particular interruption stems from the Wife’s ongoing quarrel with the Friar as they travel to Canterbury.

 **READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” use a chart similar to the one shown to keep track of the interruptions to the main story.

Interruption	Reason
criticism of friars	Wife of Bath’s quarrel with Friar in frame story



from **The Wife of Bath's Prologue**

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon  
“Madam,” he said, “by God and by St. John,  
That’s noble preaching no one could surpass!  
I was about to take a wife; alas!  
5 Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?  
There’ll be no marrying for me this year!”



“You wait,” she said, “my story’s not begun.  
You’ll taste another brew before I’ve done;  
You’ll find it doesn’t taste as good as ale;  
10 And when I’ve finished telling you my tale  
Of tribulation in the married life  
In which I’ve been an expert as a wife,  
That is to say, myself have been the whip.  
So please yourself whether you want to sip  
15 At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.  
Be cautious before making the approach,  
For I’ll give instances, and more than ten.  
And those who won’t be warned by other men,  
By other men shall suffer their correction,  
20 So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.  
You read his *Almagest*; you’ll find it there.”



“Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,”  
The Pardoner said, “go on as you began!  
Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.  
25 Instruct us younger men in your technique.”  
“Gladly,” she said, “if you will let me speak,  
But still I hope the company won’t reprove me  
Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,  
And please don’t be offended at my views;  
30 They’re really only offered to amuse. . . .”



The Wife of Bath

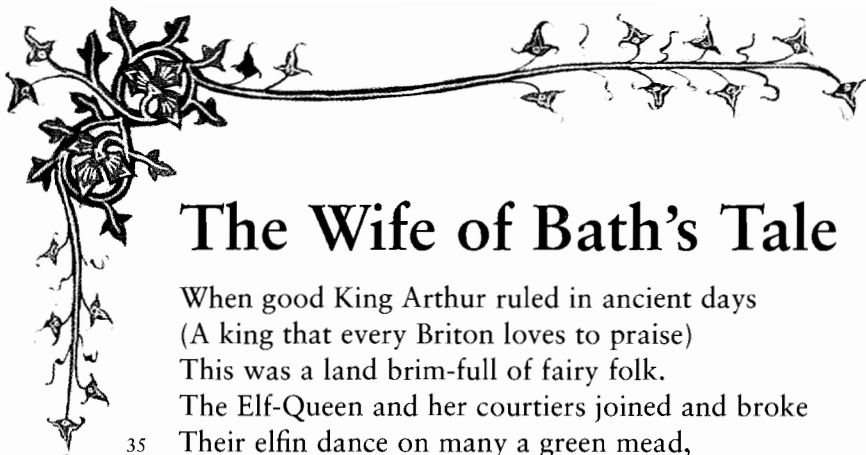
**3 noble preaching:** In the passage preceding this excerpt, the Wife of Bath has spoken at length about her view of marriage.

**15 cask:** barrel; **broach:** tap into.

**20 Ptolemy** (tŏl’ə-mā): a famous astronomer of the second century A.D. The *Almagest*, his most famous work, does not, however, contain the proverb cited in lines 18–19.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**tribulation** (trīb’yə-lā’shən) *n.* suffering; great distress



## The Wife of Bath's Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days  
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)  
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.  
The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke  
35 Their elfin dance on many a green mead,  
Or so was the opinion once, I read,  
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.  
But no one now sees fairies any more.  
For now the saintly charity and prayer  
40 Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;  
They search the countryside through field and stream  
As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,  
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,  
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,  
45 Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,  
And that's the reason why there are no fairies.  
Wherever there was wont to walk an elf  
To-day there walks the holy friar himself  
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,  
50 Saying his matins and his holy things,  
Walking his limit round from town to town.  
Women can now go safely up and down  
By every bush or under every tree;  
There is no other incubus but he,  
55 So there is really no one else to hurt you  
And he will do no more than take your virtue.



Now it so happened, I began to say,  
Long, long ago in good King Arthur's day,  
There was a knight who was a lusty liver.  
60 One day as he came riding from the river  
He saw a maiden walking all forlorn  
Ahead of him, alone as she was born.  
And of that maiden, spite of all she said,  
By very force he took her maidenhead.



65 This act of violence made such a stir,  
So much petitioning to the king for her,  
That he condemned the knight to lose his head  
By course of law. He was as good as dead

**35 mead:** meadow.

**42 motes:** specks of dust.

**43 bowers:** bedrooms.

**45 thorpes:** villages; **outhouses:** sheds.

**47 wherever . . . elf:** wherever an elf was accustomed to walk.

**51 limit:** the area to which a friar was restricted in his begging for donations.

**54 incubus** (ɪnˈkye-bəs): an evil spirit believed to descend on women while they sleep.

**39–56** What seems to be the Wife of Bath's attitude toward friars?

**61 forlorn:** sad and lonely.

**63–64 of that maiden . . . maidenhead:** in spite of the maiden's protests, he robbed her of her virtue.



(It seems that then the statutes took that view)

70 But that the queen, and other ladies too,  
Implored the king to exercise his grace  
So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case  
And granted her his life, and she could choose  
Whether to show him mercy or refuse.

71 **grace:** mercy; clemency.

65–74 What punishment do the king and the law demand? To whom does the king grant the final judgment?

75 The queen returned him thanks with all her might,  
And then she sent a summons to the knight  
At her convenience, and expressed her will:  
“You stand, for such is the position still,  
In no way certain of your life,” said she,  
80 “Yet you shall live if you can answer me:  
What is the thing that women most desire?  
Beware the axe and say as I require.

“If you can’t answer on the moment, though,  
I will concede you this: you are to go  
85 A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn  
Sufficient answer, then you shall return.  
I shall take gages from you to extort  
Surrender of your body to the court.”

87 **gages:** pledges.

Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,  
90 But there! All other choices were denied,  
And in the end he chose to go away  
And to return after a year and day  
Armed with such answer as there might be sent  
To him by God. He took his leave and went.

95 He knocked at every house, searched every place,  
Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.  
What could it be that women wanted most?  
But all the same he never touched a coast,  
Country or town in which there seemed to be  
100 Any two people willing to agree.

Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,  
“Honor,” said some, some “Jollity and pleasure,”

WORDS **statute** (stăch'ōōt) *n.* a law  
TO **implore** (ĭm-plōr') *v.* to plead; beg  
KNOW **concede** (kən-sēd') *v.* to grant or acknowledge, often unwillingly



Some “Gorgeous clothes” and others “Fun in bed,”  
 “To be oft widowed and remarried,” said  
 105 Others again, and some that what most mattered  
 Was that we should be cosseted and flattered.  
 That’s very near the truth, it seems to me;  
 A man can win us best with flattery.  
 To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,  
 110 Ensnares us all, the best and worst of us.



Some say the things we most desire are these:  
 Freedom to do exactly as we please,  
 With no one to reprove our faults and lies,  
 Rather to have one call us good and wise.  
 115 Truly there’s not a woman in ten score  
 Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,  
 But she will kick if what he says is true;  
 You try it out and you will find so too.  
 However vicious we may be within  
 120 We like to be thought wise and void of sin.  
 Others assert we women find it sweet  
 When we are thought dependable, discreet  
 And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,  
 Never betraying things that we are told.  
 125 But that’s not worth the handle of a rake;  
 Women conceal a thing? For Heaven’s sake!  
 Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?



Among some other little things, now stale,  
 Ovid relates that under his long hair  
 130 The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair  
 Of ass’s ears; as subtly as he might,  
 He kept his foul deformity from sight;  
 Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.  
 He loved her best, and trusted in her too.  
 135 He begged her not to tell a living creature  
 That he possessed so horrible a feature.  
 And she—she swore, were all the world to win,  
 She would not do such villainy and sin  
 As saddle her husband with so foul a name;  
 140 Besides to speak would be to share the shame.  
 Nevertheless she thought she would have died  
 Keeping this secret bottled up inside;

115 ten score: 200.

117 but she will: who will not.

120 void of sin: sinless.

127 Midas: a legendary king of Phrygia in Asia Minor.

129 Ovid (ŏv’ĭd): an ancient Roman poet whose *Metamorphoses* is a storehouse of Greek and Roman legends. According to Ovid, it was a barber, not Midas’s wife, who told the secret of his donkey’s ears.

133 save: except.

WORDS  
 TO KNOW  
 cosset (kŏs’ĭt) v. to treat like a pet; pamper



It seemed to swell her heart and she, no doubt,  
Thought it was on the point of bursting out.



145 Fearing to speak of it to woman or man,  
Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran  
And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire  
And, as a bittern bumbles in the mire,  
She whispered to the water, near the ground,  
150 “Betray me not, O water, with thy sound!  
To thee alone I tell it: it appears  
My husband has a pair of ass’s ears!  
Ah! My heart’s well again, the secret’s out!  
I could no longer keep it, not a doubt.”  
155 And so you see, although we may hold fast  
A little while, it must come out at last,  
We can’t keep secrets; as for Midas, well,  
Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.

147 **sedge**: marsh grasses.

148 **bumbles in the mire**: booms in the swamp. (The bittern, a wading bird, is famous for its loud call.)  
What does this comparison suggest about the queen’s whisper?



This knight that I am telling you about  
160 Perceived at last he never would find out  
What it could be that women loved the best.  
Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast,  
As home he went, he dared no longer stay;  
His year was up and now it was the day.



165 As he rode home in a dejected mood  
Suddenly, at the margin of a wood,  
He saw a dance upon the leafy floor  
Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.  
Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn  
170 Some words of wisdom ere he should return;  
But lo! Before he came to where they were,  
Dancers and dance all vanished into air!  
There wasn’t a living creature to be seen  
Save one old woman crouched upon the green.  
175 A fouler-looking creature I suppose  
Could scarcely be imagined. She arose  
And said, “Sir knight, there’s no way on from here.  
Tell me what you are looking for, my dear,  
For peradventure that were best for you;  
180 We old, old women know a thing or two.”



Sir Gawain, from an illuminated manuscript

179 **peradventure**: perhaps.

WORDS  
TO KNOW  
**dejected** (dĭ-jĕk'tīd) *adj.* sad; depressed





“Dear Mother,” said the knight, “alack the day!  
 I am as good as dead if I can’t say  
 What thing it is that women most desire;  
 If you could tell me I would pay your hire.”  
 185 “Give me your hand,” she said, “and swear to do  
 Whatever I shall next require of you  
 —If so to do should lie within your might—  
 And you shall know the answer before night.”  
 “Upon my honor,” he answered, “I agree.”  
 190 “Then,” said the crone, “I dare to guarantee  
 Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim.  
 Upon my life the queen will say the same.  
 Show me the very proudest of them all  
 In costly coverchief or jewelled caul  
 195 That dare say no to what I have to teach.  
 Let us go forward without further speech.”  
 And then she crooned her gospel in his ear  
 And told him to be glad and not to fear.

**181 alack the day:** an exclamation of sorrow, roughly equivalent to “Woe is me!”



The Knight and the Old Lady

They came to court. This knight, in full array,  
 200 Stood forth and said, “O Queen, I’ve kept my day  
 And kept my word and have my answer ready.”

**194 coverchief:** kerchief; **caul** (kaul): an ornamental hair-net.

**197 gospel:** message.

**199 in full array:** in all his finery.

**202 heady:** giddy; impetuous.

**203 grace:** gift.

There sat the noble matrons and the heady  
 Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace  
 Of wisdom, all assembled in that place,  
 205 And there the queen herself was throned to hear  
 And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near  
 And silence was commanded through the hall.

The queen gave order he should tell them all  
 What thing it was that women wanted most.  
 210 He stood not silent like a beast or post,  
 But gave his answer with the ringing word  
 Of a man’s voice and the assembly heard:

“My liege and lady, in general,” said he,  
 “A woman wants the self-same sovereignty  
 215 Over her husband as over her lover,  
 And master him; he must not be above her.

**213 liege** (lēj): lord.

**214 sovereignty** (sōv’ər-ŷn-tē): rule; power.

**214–215** How might a woman’s power over a lover differ from her power over a husband?

WORDS  
 TO **crone** (krōn) *n.* an ugly old woman; hag  
 KNOW



That is your greatest wish, whether you kill  
Or spare me; please yourself. I wait your will.”



In all the court not one that shook her head  
220 Or contradicted what the knight had said;  
Maid, wife and widow cried, “He’s saved his life!”



And on the word up started the old wife,  
The one the knight saw sitting on the green,  
And cried, “Your mercy, sovereign lady queen!  
225 Before the court disperses, do me right!  
'Twas I who taught this answer to the knight,  
For which he swore, and pledged his honor to it,  
That the first thing I asked of him he’d do it,  
So far as it should lie within his might.  
230 Before this court I ask you then, sir knight,  
To keep your word and take me for your wife;  
For well you know that I have saved your life.  
If this be false, deny it on your sword!”



“Alas!” he said, “Old lady, by the Lord  
235 I know indeed that such was my behest,  
But for God’s love think of a new request,  
Take all my goods, but leave my body free.”  
“A curse on us,” she said, “if I agree!  
I may be foul, I may be poor and old,  
240 Yet will not choose to be, for all the gold  
That’s bedded in the earth or lies above,  
Less than your wife, nay, than your very love!”

**235 behest** (bĭ-hĕst’): promise.



“My love?” said he. “By heaven, my damnation!  
Alas that any of my race and station  
245 Should ever make so foul a misalliance!”  
Yet in the end his pleading and defiance  
All went for nothing, he was forced to wed.  
He takes his ancient wife and goes to bed.

**244 race and station:** family and rank.

**245 misalliance** (mĭs’ə-lĭ’əns): an unsuitable marriage.



Now peradventure some may well suspect  
250 A lack of care in me since I neglect  
To tell of the rejoicing and display  
Made at the feast upon their wedding-day.  
I have but a short answer to let fall;  
I say there was no joy or feast at all,





255 Nothing but heaviness of heart and sorrow.  
 He married her in private on the morrow  
 And all day long stayed hidden like an owl,  
 It was such torture that his wife looked foul.

256 **the morrow:** the next day.

Great was the anguish churning in his head  
 260 When he and she were piloted to bed;  
 He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.  
 His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;  
 At last she said, “Bless us! Is this, my dear,  
 How knights and wives get on together here?  
 265 Are these the laws of good King Arthur’s house?  
 Are knights of his all so contemptuous?  
 I am your own beloved and your wife,  
 And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;  
 And certainly I never did you wrong.  
 270 Then why, this first of nights, so sad a song?  
 You’re carrying on as if you were half-witted.  
 Say, for God’s love, what sin have I committed?  
 I’ll put things right if you will tell me how.”

260 **piloted:** led. (In the Middle Ages, it was customary for the wedding party to escort the bride and groom to their bedchamber.)

261 **wallowed** (wŏl’ōd): rolled around; thrashed about.

“Put right?” he cried. “That never can be now!  
 275 Nothing can ever be put right again!  
 You’re old, and so abominably plain,  
 So poor to start with, so low-bred to follow;  
 It’s little wonder if I twist and wallow!  
 God, that my heart would burst within my breast!”

280 “Is that,” said she, “the cause of your unrest?”

“Yes, certainly,” he said, “and can you wonder?”

“I could set right what you suppose a blunder,  
 That’s if I cared to, in a day or two,  
 If I were shown more courtesy by you.  
 285 Just now,” she said, “you spoke of gentle birth,  
 Such as descends from ancient wealth and worth.  
 If that’s the claim you make for gentlemen  
 Such arrogance is hardly worth a hen.  
 Whoever loves to work for virtuous ends,



Dante and his Poem,  
 Domenico di Michelino

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**contemptuous** (kən-tĕmp’chōō-əs) *adj.* scornful; openly disrespectful  
**abominably** (ə-bŏm’ə-nĕ-blĕ) *adv.* unpleasantly; terribly



290 Public and private, and who most intends  
 To do what deeds of gentleness he can,  
 Take him to be the greatest gentleman.  
 Christ wills we take our gentleness from Him,  
 Not from a wealth of ancestry long dim,  
 295 Though they bequeath their whole establishment  
 By which we claim to be of high descent.  
 Our fathers cannot make us a bequest  
 Of all those virtues that became them best  
 And earned for them the name of gentlemen,  
 300 But bade us follow them as best we can.



“Thus the wise poet of the Florentines,  
 Dante by name, has written in these lines,  
 For such is the opinion Dante launches:  
 ‘Seldom arises by these slender branches  
 305 Prowess of men, for it is God, no less,  
 Wills us to claim of Him our gentleness.’  
 For of our parents nothing can we claim  
 Save temporal things, and these may hurt and maim.



“But everyone knows this as well as I;  
 310 For if gentility were implanted by  
 The natural course of lineage down the line,  
 Public or private, could it cease to shine  
 In doing the fair work of gentle deed?  
 No vice or villainy could then bear seed.



“Take fire and carry it to the darkest house  
 Between this kingdom and the Caucasus,  
 And shut the doors on it and leave it there,  
 It will burn on, and it will burn as fair  
 As if ten thousand men were there to see,  
 320 For fire will keep its nature and degree,  
 I can assure you, sir, until it dies.



“But gentleness, as you will recognize,  
 Is not annexed in nature to possessions.  
 Men fail in living up to their professions;  
 325 But fire never ceases to be fire.

**285–292** What does the old woman think is the chief qualification of a gentleman? How would you define “gentle birth” and “gentleness” as used in this passage?

**301 Florentines:** the people of Florence, Italy.

**302 Dante** (dän'tā): a famous medieval Italian poet. The quotation in lines 304–306 is a paraphrase of a passage in Dante's most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, which he completed in 1321.

**310 gentility** (jěn-tīl'ī-tē): the quality possessed by a gentle, or noble, person.

**316 Caucasus** (kô'kə-sēs): a region of western Asia, between the Black and Caspian seas.

**324 professions:** beliefs; ideals.

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**bequeath** (bī-kwēth') *v.* to leave in a will; give as an inheritance  
**pro prowess** (prou'f's) *n.* superior skill; great ability  
**temporal** (tēm'pər-əl) *adj.* of the material world; not eternal  
**maim** (mām) *v.* to disable or permanently wound



God knows you'll often find, if you enquire,  
Some lording full of villainy and shame.  
If you would be esteemed for the mere name  
Of having been by birth a gentleman  
330 And stemming from some virtuous, noble clan,  
And do not live yourself by gentle deed  
Or take your father's noble code and creed,  
You are no gentleman, though duke or earl.  
Vice and bad manners are what make a churl.

**327 lording:** lord; nobleman.

335 “Gentility is only the renown  
For bounty that your fathers handed down,  
Quite foreign to your person, not your own;  
Gentility must come from God alone.  
That we are gentle comes to us by grace  
340 And by no means is it bequeathed with place.

**334 churl** (chûrl): low-class person; boor. Why might the sentiment expressed in this line have been viewed as fairly radical in the Wife of Bath's day?

“Reflect how noble (says Valerius)  
Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,  
Who rose from poverty to nobleness.  
And read Boethius, Seneca no less,  
345 Thus they express themselves and are agreed:  
‘Gentle is he that does a gentle deed.’  
And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude  
That even if my ancestors were rude,  
Yet God on high—and so I hope He will—  
350 Can grant me grace to live in virtue still,  
A gentlewoman only when beginning  
To live in virtue and to shrink from sinning.

**341 Valerius** (və-ſlɪr'ē-əs): Valerius Maximus, a Roman writer of the first century A.D. who compiled a collection of historical anecdotes.

**342 Tullius** (tūl'ē-əs) surnamed **Hostilius** (hō-stɪl'ē-əs): Tullus Hostilius—in Roman legend, the third king of the Romans.

**344 Boethius** (bō-ē'thē-əs): a Christian philosopher of the Dark Ages; **Seneca** (sɛn'ŷ-kə): an ancient Roman philosopher, writer, teacher, and politician.

“As for my poverty which you reprove,  
Almighty God Himself in whom we move,  
355 Believe and have our being, chose a life  
Of poverty, and every man or wife,  
Nay, every child can see our Heavenly King  
Would never stoop to choose a shameful thing.  
No shame in poverty if the heart is gay,  
360 As Seneca and all the learned say.  
He who accepts his poverty unhurt  
I'd say is rich although he lacked a shirt.  
But truly poor are they who whine and fret  
And covet what they cannot hope to get.  
365 And he that, having nothing, covets not,



Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.

366 **sot**: fool.



“True poverty can find a song to sing.

Juvenal says a pleasant little thing:

‘The poor can dance and sing in the relief

370 Of having nothing that will tempt a thief.’

Though it be hateful, poverty is good,

A great incentive to a livelihood,

And a great help to our capacity

For wisdom, if accepted patiently.

375 Poverty is, though wanting in estate,

A kind of wealth that none calumniate.

Poverty often, when the heart is lowly,

Brings one to God and teaches what is holy,

Gives knowledge of oneself and even lends

380 A glass by which to see one’s truest friends.

And since it’s no offense, let me be plain;

Do not rebuke my poverty again.

368 **Juvenal** (jōō’və-nəl): an ancient Roman satirist.

375 **wanting in estate**: lacking in grandeur.

376 **calumniate** (kə-lŭm’nē-āt’): criticize with false statements; slander.



“Lastly you taxed me, sir, with being old.

Yet even if you never had been told

385 By ancient books, you gentlemen engage,

Yourselves in honor to respect old age.

To call an old man ‘father’ shows good breeding,

And this could be supported from my reading.



“You say I’m old and fouler than a fen.

390 You need not fear to be a cuckold, then.

Filth and old age, I’m sure you will agree,

Are powerful wardens over chastity.

Nevertheless, well knowing your delights,

I shall fulfil your worldly appetites.

389 **fen**: marsh.

390 **cuckold** (kŭk’əld): a husband whose wife is unfaithful.



395 “You have two choices; which one will you try?

To have me old and ugly till I die,

But still a loyal, true, and humble wife

That never will displease you all her life,

Or would you rather I were young and pretty

400 And chance your arm what happens in a city

Where friends will visit you because of me,

Yes, and in other places too, maybe.

400 **chance your arm**: take your chance on.

WORDS

TO

**rebuke** (rĭ-byōōk’) v. to criticize

KNOW



Which would you have? The choice is all your own.”



The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan  
 405 At last he said, with all the care in life,  
 “My lady and my love, my dearest wife,  
 I leave the matter to your wise decision.  
 You make the choice yourself, for the provision  
 Of what may be agreeable and rich  
 410 In honor to us both, I don’t care which;  
 Whatever pleases you suffices me.”

**404 piteous** (pĭt’ē-əs): pitiable; pathetic.



“And have I won the mastery?” said she,  
 “Since I’m to choose and rule as I think fit?”  
 “Certainly, wife,” he answered her, “that’s it.”  
 415 “Kiss me,” she cried. “No quarrels! On my oath  
 And word of honor, you shall find me both,  
 That is, both fair and faithful as a wife;  
 May I go howling mad and take my life  
 Unless I prove to be as good and true  
 420 As ever wife was since the world was new!  
 And if to-morrow when the sun’s above  
 I seem less fair than any lady-love,  
 Than any queen or empress east or west,  
 Do with my life and death as you think best.  
 425 Cast up the curtain, husband. Look at me!”

**411 suffices** (sə-fĭ’səz): satisfies.  
 How does the knight’s statement relate to what he has learned about “the thing that women most desire”?



And when indeed the knight had looked to see,  
 Lo, she was young and lovely, rich in charms.  
 In ecstasy he caught her in his arms,  
 His heart went bathing in a bath of blisses  
 430 And melted in a hundred thousand kisses,  
 And she responded in the fullest measure  
 With all that could delight or give him pleasure.



The Lover and the Lady, from an illuminated manuscript



So they lived ever after to the end  
 In perfect bliss; and may Christ Jesus send  
 435 Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed,  
 And grace to overbid them when we wed.  
 And—Jesu hear my prayer!—cut short the lives  
 Of those who won’t be governed by their wives;  
 And all old, angry niggards of their pence,  
 440 God send them soon a very pestilence!

**439 niggards**: misers.

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**ecstasy** (ĕk’stə-sē) *n.* intense joy or delight; bliss

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

Were you surprised by the outcome of the knight's quest? Why or why not?

### Comprehension Check

- What change does the queen make in the knight's sentence?
- What information does the old woman give the knight?
- What happens to the old woman after the knight agrees to abide by her decision?

## Think Critically

- In what way is the question that the queen poses to the knight related to the crime that he has committed?
- What **theme**, or message, about marriage would you say the tale conveys? Do you agree with the message? Why or why not?
- ACTIVE READING ANALYZING STRUCTURE** Look over your chart in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK** and review the reasons you inferred. What do the interruptions tell you about what matters to the Wife of Bath?
- Consider the **narrator** of the "Prologue." How would you describe his values?

THINK ABOUT

- his characterizations of people like the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Wife of Bath
- his opinions of their actions
- his description of himself as "short of wit" in line 766 of the "Prologue" (page 134)

## Extend Interpretations

- Comparing Texts** Which part of *The Canterbury Tales*—the "Prologue" or the two tales—did you find the most enjoyable or interesting? Give reasons for your choice.
- Critic's Corner** One critic has described Chaucer as "a modern writer," one whose work can be appreciated by every generation of readers. Do you agree with this observation? Cite specific passages of *The Canterbury Tales* to back up your opinion.
- Connect to Life** Do you see any similarities between the attitudes of the Wife of Bath and the old woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and the attitudes of modern American women? Cite details to support your answer.

## Literary Analysis

**NARRATOR** The teller of a story in prose or verse is known as the story's **narrator**. The narrator may be a character in the story or a voice outside the action. In the "Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales*, a narrator (whom Chaucer identifies as himself) introduces several characters, who then narrate the various tales.

**Cooperative Learning Activity** In a small-group discussion, consider how the portrait of the Wife of Bath in lines 455–486 of the "Prologue" (page 125) relates to the tale that she tells. Then work with the group to create a chart in which you list as many details about the Wife of Bath as you can. Include details about her appearance, skills, social position, personality, attitudes, and motives.

Detail	Evidence
worthy	"Prologue," lines 455 and 469
somewhat deaf	"Prologue," line 456





## THE AUTHOR'S STYLE

### Chaucer's Realism as Entertainment

Chaucer's enduring appeal as a poet stems in part from the humor and realism of his characterizations. Chaucer had no illusions about humanity, yet he showed a genuine fondness for human beings—warts and all. His combination of detachment and sympathy distinguishes his writing style.

#### Key Aspects of Chaucer's Style

- a gentle irony that exposes characters' faults while emphasizing their essential humanity
- a use of vivid but spare imagery and figurative language in describing characters' physical appearance
- a clear differentiation between characters
- a stylistic appropriateness of the tales to their narrators (Each character has a particular "voice.")

## Analysis of Style

On the right are five excerpts from *The Canterbury Tales*. Study the chart above and read the excerpts carefully. Then,

- find examples of the listed aspects of Chaucer's style
- explain what, if anything, is amusing about each excerpt and identify which aspects of style contribute to this effect
- go back through the selections from *The Canterbury Tales* and find other examples of these key aspects of Chaucer's style

## Applications

**1. Speaking and Listening** With a partner, study the description of either the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath in the "Prologue." Then read aloud selected passages from the character's tale in the way that the character might have told it. Have your partner critique your oral interpretation and suggest improvements.

**2. Illustrating Style** Choose one of Chaucer's pilgrims whose physical appearance is vividly described. Then draw a picture of the character, based on Chaucer's description.

**3. Imitating Style** In poetry or prose, create a character (preferably from a modern profession) and describe him or her with the mixture of detachment and sympathy that Chaucer used to such advantage.

from the **Prologue**

*About the Prioress:*

For courtliness she had a special zest,  
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean  
That not a trace of grease was to be seen  
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,  
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.

*About the Doctor:*

Yet he was rather close as to expenses  
And kept the gold he won in pestilences.  
Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.  
He therefore had a special love of gold.

*About the Summoner:*

There was a Summoner with us at that Inn,  
His face on fire, like a cherubin,  
For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,  
He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.  
Black scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.  
Children were afraid when he appeared.

from **The Pardoner's Tale**

There is, in Avicenna's long relation  
Concerning poison and its operation,  
Trust me, no ghastlier section to transcend  
What these two wretches suffered at their end.  
Thus these two murderers received their due,  
So did the treacherous young poisoner too.


from **The Wife of Bath's Tale**

Others assert we women find it sweet  
When we are thought dependable, discreet  
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,  
Never betraying things that we are told.  
But that's not worth the handle of a rake;  
Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!



## Writing Options

**1. Pilgrim Dialogue** How might the other pilgrims have reacted to the “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”? Write a dialogue in which at least two pilgrims, as well as the Wife of Bath herself, comment on the story and its message about men’s and women’s roles. Try to keep the comments true to the personalities and attitudes of the pilgrims as conveyed in the “Prologue.”

**2. Comparing Knights** The Knight on the Canterbury pilgrimage, described in lines 43–80 of the “Prologue” (pages 114–115) is usually considered a model of chivalry. Write a short compare-and-contrast essay in which you compare the Knight with the knight in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” You might organize your ideas in a Venn diagram. Put your essay in your **Working Portfolio**. 

### Writing Handbook

See page 1367: Compare and Contrast.

## Activities & Explorations

**1. Gender Debate** Conduct a debate about the key ingredients in healthy relationships. Your debate might focus on the differing expectations and responsibilities of men and women in life and in relationships.

~ SPEAKING AND LISTENING

**2. Medieval Manuscript** Create your own manuscript page of a passage from “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” or another tale by Chaucer. Include the text of the passage, an appropriate illustration, and a decorative border for the page. ~ ART

**3. Costume Drawings** Imagine a live performance of one of the tales. Find or draw pictures that show how the characters might be dressed.

~ ART

**4. Woman’s Roles** Find out more about the roles of women in Chaucer’s day. Was the Wife of Bath representative of her sex? Did widows like her have more independence than married or single women? What was life like for noble women? for women affiliated with the church? Answer these questions in an oral report. ~ HISTORY

**5. Medieval Justice** The justice meted out in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” may seem unusual by modern standards. Find out more about justice in medieval England. What influence did the monarch have over the courts of justice? What role did the church play in justice? What exactly is English common law?

What were trial by combat and trial by ordeal, and when did they cease to be used? How did the jury system evolve? How

were lawyers trained? Research the answer to one of these questions or a related question, then share your findings in a written report.

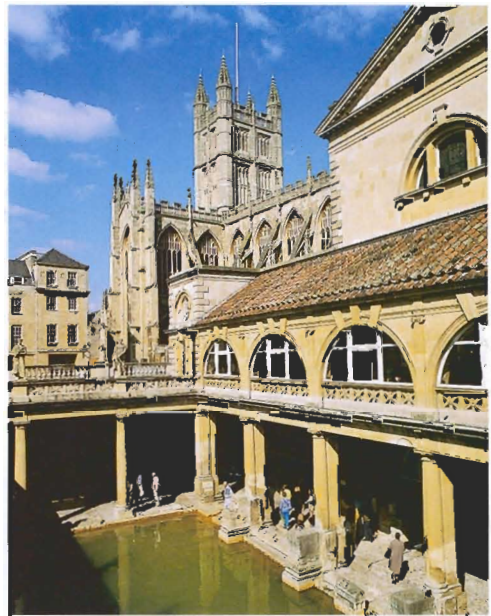
~ HISTORY

## Inquiry & Research

**Bath** The city of Bath in England (pictured below) has a history

that dates back to Roman times. Research this city, the home of the Wife of Bath. Present your findings in an illustrated time line entitled “Bath Yesterday and Today.”

Scene from Bath today





## Vocabulary in Action

**EXERCISE A: SYNONYMS** On your paper, write the word that is closest in meaning to the boldfaced word.

1. **concede**: follow, grant, start, end
2. **statute**: regulation, remark, area, sculpture
3. **prowess**: stress, talent, front, back
4. **cosset**: release, urge, indulge, intrude
5. **implore**: beget, beseech, believe, belittle
6. **crone**: murmur, wizard, hag, scream
7. **abominably**: awfully, feebly, unwisely, easily

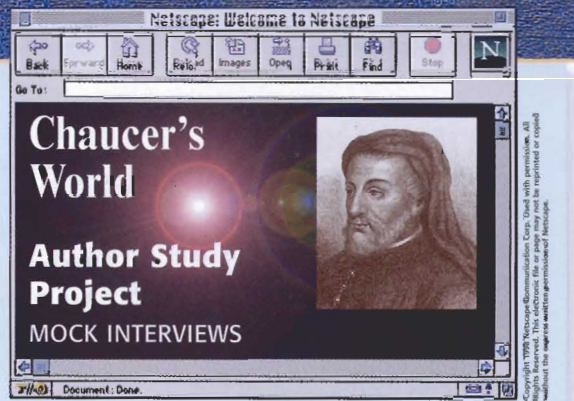
**EXERCISE B: ANTONYMS** On your paper, write the word whose meaning is most nearly opposite the meaning of the boldfaced word.

1. **tribulation**: criticism, sorrow, peace, anger
2. **bequeath**: gain, argue, doubt, inherit
3. **rebuke**: praise, predict, question, answer
4. **dejected**: depressed, elated, inserted, wise
5. **temporal**: harsh, timely, worldly, spiritual
6. **ecstasy**: misery, fury, confusion, bliss
7. **contemptuous**: proud, kind, new, respectful
8. **maim**: scar, scorn, infect, heal

WORDS TO KNOW	abominably	crone	prowess
	bequeath	dejected	rebuke
	concede	ecstasy	statute
	contemptuous	implore	temporal
	cosset	maim	tribulation

### Building Vocabulary

Several Words to Know in this lesson derive from Old or Middle English. For an in-depth study of word origins, see page 206.



Research and present a series of mock interviews with English men and women of Chaucer's day. Begin by brainstorming a list of possible interviewees with the entire class. Consider the characters in the "Prologue" of *The Canterbury Tales* and the professions mentioned in the biographical information about Chaucer. Then get together with a partner and research one of the medieval people or lifestyles. Use your findings to prepare questions and discussion points for a mock interview in which one member of your pair takes on the role of interviewer and the other portrays a medieval person.

**Primary Print Sources** Consider reading letters and diaries from the era, as well as more of *The Canterbury Tales*. A brief general survey of English literature, such as one found in an encyclopedia, might help you locate appropriate medieval sources.

**Secondary Print Sources** Social histories, which focus on people's daily lives, may prove to be valuable sources. Biographies of Chaucer and other people of his day should also be useful. Consider books that combine biography and social history, such as John Gardner's *The Life and Times of Chaucer*.

**Web Sites** Search for the Web sites of Chaucer and Middle English societies, medieval museums, and British castles. Also use the Web to locate medieval studies departments at British and American universities.



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