

## “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales* by G. Chaucer, translated by Nevill Coghill

### **Before You Read      Make the Connection**

No one on the road to Canterbury is more recognizable than the Wife of Bath (a married woman from the city of Bath, west of London). She is Chaucer’s most vibrant and lively character. Having outlived five husbands (and possibly looking for a sixth on the pilgrimage), she is witty, intelligent, opinionated, and sensual. The tale that she tells belongs to the “marriage group,” several tales that explore what men and women expect from and ought to do in marriage. In the tale, a knight must find the answer to the question “What is the thing that women most desire?” How would you answer this question? Jot down your thoughts before you read.

### **Literary Focus: Narrator**

Every **narrator**, or person who tells a story, has a distinct voice or character that is revealed through the subject matter of the story, the story’s tone, and the language that sets that tone. It’s important not to confuse a story’s narrator with its author, especially when the narrator is not an obvious presence. In the case of the tale you’re about to read, it’s impossible not to notice the narrator. Chaucer is a master at matching his narrators and their stories. The Wife of Bath, for example, reveals as much about herself in her tale as she does about medieval society or the desires of women.

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**A narrator** is one who tells, or narrates, a story.

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### **Reading Skills**

#### **Interpreting Character**

The Wife of Bath is an opinionated woman with very definite ideas about women, men, and marriage. We cannot be sure that her views represent those of Chaucer or of the majority of women of her day, but we do get a very clear picture of what *she* believes. As you read, jot down details that reveal the Wife of Bath’s views on women, marriage, and true gentility or goodness. The, think about how her views relate to her character. In other words, do you think she practices what she preaches?

### **The Prologue**

The Pardoner started up,<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> has said, in this connection.  
You read his *Almagest*;<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pardoner is responding to comments made by the Wife of Bath about wanting a sixth husband who will be both her debtor and her slave.

<sup>2</sup> Distress; suffering.

<sup>3</sup> (A.D. 100?–165?) ancient geographer, astronomer, and mathematician from Alexandria, Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> Word meaning “the greatest”; another title for Ptolemy’s major work, *Mathematical Composition*, in which he argues that the earth is the center of the universe, a view held in Europe until 1543.

## **The 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<sup>5</sup> joined and broke  
35 Their elfin dance on many a green mead,<sup>6</sup>  
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<sup>7</sup> that speckle a sun-beam,  
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,  
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,  
45 Thorpes,<sup>8</sup> barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,  
And that’s the reason why there are no fairies.  
Wherever there was wont<sup>9</sup> to walk an elf  
To-day there walks the holy friar himself  
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,  
50 Saying his matins<sup>10</sup> 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<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>  
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.<sup>13</sup>  
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

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<sup>5</sup> Attendants.

<sup>6</sup> Meadow.

<sup>7</sup> Dust particles.

<sup>8</sup> Villages.

<sup>9</sup> Accustomed.

<sup>10</sup> Morning prayers.

<sup>11</sup> Evil spirit believed to descend on a sleeping woman and make her pregnant.

<sup>12</sup> In medieval times, the liver – not the heart – was believed to be the source of all desires and emotions.

<sup>13</sup> Virginity.

(It seems that then the statutes<sup>14</sup> 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.  
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<sup>15</sup> from you to extort  
Surrender of your body to the court.”  
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,”  
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<sup>16</sup> 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 Ensnare 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<sup>17</sup>  
Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,

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<sup>14</sup> Laws.

<sup>15</sup> Pledges.

<sup>16</sup> Pampered.

<sup>17</sup> Two hundred. A score is twenty.

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?<sup>18</sup> Will you hear the tale?  
Among some other little things, now stale,  
Ovid<sup>19</sup> 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;  
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.<sup>20</sup> Her heart was all on fire  
And, as a bittern<sup>21</sup> 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;<sup>22</sup> he will tell.  
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<sup>23</sup> 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<sup>24</sup> that were best for you;  
180 We old, old women know a thing or two.”  
“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 jeweled caul!”<sup>25</sup>  
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.  
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.”  
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

<sup>18</sup> Mythical king. Everything he touched turned to gold.

<sup>19</sup> Roman poet. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a collection of tales, includes one version of the Midas story.

<sup>20</sup> Grasslike plant.

<sup>21</sup> Type of wading bird.

<sup>22</sup> In Ovid’s version, it is Midas’s barber, not his wife, who tells the secret to a hole in the ground. Reeds grow up from the spot and whisper the secret whenever the wind rustles them.

<sup>23</sup> Edge.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps.

<sup>25</sup> Women’s headgear. The coverchief covered the entire head; the caul, a small, netted cap, was sometimes ornamented.

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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<sup>26</sup> and lady, in general,” said he,  
“A woman wants the self-same sovereignty<sup>27</sup>  
215 Over her husband as over her lover,  
And master him; he must not be above her.  
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,<sup>28</sup>  
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!”  
“My love?” said he. “By heaven, my damnation!  
Alas that any of my race and station  
245 Should ever make so foul a misalliance!”<sup>29</sup>  
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.  
Now peradventure some may well suspect  
250 A lack of care in me since I neglect  
To tell of the rejoicings 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.  
Great was the anguish churning in his head  
260 When he and she were piloted to bed;  
He wallowed<sup>30</sup> 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.”  
“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,  
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<sup>31</sup> by name, has written in these lines,  
For such is the opinion Dante launches:

<sup>26</sup> Lord.

<sup>27</sup> Power.

<sup>28</sup> Command, order.

<sup>29</sup> Here, a marriage that is unsuitable or inappropriate.

<sup>30</sup> Tossed and turned.

<sup>31</sup> Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Italian poet who wrote *The Divine Comedy*.

‘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<sup>32</sup> 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.  
315 “Take fire and carry it to the darkest house  
Between this kingdom and the Caucasus,<sup>33</sup>  
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;<sup>34</sup>  
325 But fire never ceases to be fire.  
God knows you’ll often find, if you inquire,  
Some lording<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>  
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.  
“Reflect how noble (says Valerius<sup>37</sup>)  
Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,<sup>38</sup>  
Who rose from poverty to nobleness.

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<sup>32</sup> Ancestry.

<sup>33</sup> Mountain range in SE Europe, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea; in other words, far away.

<sup>34</sup> Promises.

<sup>35</sup> Alternate form of *lord*.

<sup>36</sup> Ill-mannered person.

<sup>37</sup> First-century A.D. Roman writer who collected historical anecdotes that public speakers could use.

<sup>38</sup> Tullius Hostilius was a legendary king of Rome who rose from humble origins.

And read Boethius,<sup>39</sup> Seneca<sup>40</sup> 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.  
“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.<sup>41</sup>  
“True poverty can find a song to sing.  
Juvenal<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>  
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.  
“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,

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<sup>39</sup> (c. A.D. 480-c. 524) Roman philosopher. In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, he argues that rank is no guarantee of honorable conduct.

<sup>40</sup> (c. 4 B.C. – c. A.D. 65) Roman philosopher whose works were popular in the Middle Ages.

<sup>41</sup> Fool.

<sup>42</sup> (c. A.D. 60 – c. 140) Roman satirist.

<sup>43</sup> Slander.

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And this could be supported from my reading.  
“You say I’m old and fouler than a fen.”<sup>44</sup>  
390 You need not fear to be a cuckold,<sup>45</sup> then.  
Filth and old age, I’m sure you will agree,  
Are powerful wardens over chastity.  
Nevertheless, well knowing your delights,  
I shall fulfill your worldly appetites.  
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.  
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<sup>46</sup> me.”  
“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!”  
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.  
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.

<sup>44</sup> Swamp.

<sup>45</sup> Man whose wife has been unfaithful to him.

<sup>46</sup> Satisfies.

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,<sup>47</sup>  
440 God send them soon a very pestilence!

**Making Meanings Reading Check**

- What were the knight’s crime, his original sentence, and his second sentence?
- What bargain do the knight and the old woman strike?
- What payment for her help does the old woman demand, and what is the knight’s response?
- What final choice does the old woman offer the knight at the end of the tale? What is his response?

**First Thoughts**

- What did you think of the Wife of Bath’s opinion about what women want most? If she were asked what men want most, how do you suppose she would respond?

**Shaping Interpretations**

- The knight’s quest is to find out what women want. What **irony** do you see in this?
- In lines 276–278, the knight moans about having the old woman for his wife. How does she respond to each objection he raises?
- How does the knight’s response to the choice given him by the old woman show that he’s learned his lesson about what women want?
- What opinions does the Wife of Bath express in the tale? What do all her opinions and her tale itself tell you about her **character**?
- Look at the various things the Wife of Bath, in her tale, says people think women want. What do you think of those proposed answers?

**Extending the Text**

- What do you think contemporary men and women think about what the other wants most out of life or from a relationship? Do you think they would agree, or do they have different wishes and expectations of one another?

- How would the Wife of Bath fit into contemporary society? What social trends would she support or reject?

**Challenging the Text**

- Consider the way this story begins and ends. How does the knight get into trouble, and how do things turn out for him? Does the story satisfy or trouble you, and are there any elements that bother you?

<sup>47</sup> Stingy with their money.