**“Wife of Bath’s Tale”**

Introduction, written by a professor

The tale is meant to illustrate the contention of her prologue: that a marriage in which the woman has the mastery is the best, and the conclusion of one closely coincides with the other. The tale also seems to express her desire to be young and beautiful again. Moreover, the Prologue is about three times as long as the tale to which it is supposed to be a short introduction. If that is appropriate for anyone, it is so for Alison (real name of the Wife) of Bath, about whom everything is large to the point of exaggeration: her bulk, her clothes, her mouth, the number of her marriages, the extent of her travels, her zest for sex, her love of domination, her torrential delivery. She is wonderful company provided one is not married to her and as her previous five husbands have died. She is basically a medieval Venus Fly trap.

Claymation reenactment of her tale: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3cvOm7qStk>

Compilation of resources for this tale: <http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/wife.htm>

The entire prologue and tale in Middle English: <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/gchaucer/bl-gchau-can-bath.htm>

**Actual Tale**

**(While reading, keep in mind that when Chaucer says “wife,” he really means “woman.” So an old, ugly “wife” is just and old, ugly woman and the “Wife of Bath” is just a woman from the town of Bath).**

In the old days of King Arthur, today

It happened that King Arthur had with him

A bachelor in his house; this lusty knight,

While riding from his hawking by the river,

Once chanced upon, alone as she was born, 885

A maiden who was walking--soon forlorn,

For he, despite all that she did or said,

By force deprived her of her *maidenhead*. *virginity*

Because of this, there was such clamoring

And such demand for justice to the king, 890

This knight was all but numbered with the dead

By course of law, and should have lost his head

But then the queen and other ladies too

Prayed so long that the king might grant him grace, 895

King Arthur spared him for at least a space;

He left him to the queen to do her will,

To choose to save or order them to kill.

The queen then thanked the king with all her might,

And after this the queen spoke with the knight 900

When she saw opportunity one day.

"For you," she said, "things stand in such a way

You can't be sure if you're to live or not.

I'll grant you life if you can tell me what

It is that women most desire. Beware 905

The iron ax, *your neckbone now to spare*! *I will tell you how to save your life*

And if you cannot tell me right away,

I'll give you leave, *a twelvemonth and a day*, *A year*

That you may go to seek, that you might find

An answer that is of sufficient kind. 910

I want your word before you take a pace:

You'll bring yourself back to this very place."

This knight with sorrow sighed, was full of woe.

What could he do? Not as he pleased, and so

To go away was what he finally chose, 915

To come back when his year was at its close

With such an answer as God might provide.

He took his leave and forth he went to ride.

He sought in every house and every place

In hopes he could secure the promised grace 920

By learning that which women love the most.

But he did not arrive at any coast

Where he could find two people on the matter

Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.

Some said that women all love riches best, 925

While some said honor, others jolly,

Some rich array; some said delights in bed,

Some others said that our hearts are most eased

When we are flattered and when we are pleased-- 930

This knight of whom my tale is all about,

When seeing that he couldn't find it out--

That is to say, what women love the most-- 985

Felt in his breast already like a ghost;

For home he headed, he could not *sojourn*, *get distracted by a side journey*

The day had come when homeward he must turn.

And in this *woeful* state he chanced to ride *sad, depressed*

While on his way along a forest side, 990

And there he saw upon the forest floor

Some ladies dancing, twenty-four or more.

Toward these dancers he was quick to turn

In hope that of some wisdom he might learn;

But all at once, before he'd gotten there, 995

The dancers disappeared, he knew not where.

He didn't see one creature bearing life,

Save sitting on the green one single wife.

An uglier creature no mind could devise.

"Dear wife," said the knight, "it is for sure 1005

That I am dead if I cannot secure

What thing it is that women most desire.

If you could teach me, gladly I would hire."

"Give me your word here in my hand," said she,

"The next thing I request you'll do for me 1010

If it's a thing that lies within your might,

And I will tell you then before it's night."

The knight said, "Here's my oath, I guarantee."

"Then certainly I dare to boast," said she,

"Your life is safe, for I'll be standing by; 1015

I’ll tell you the thing and, the queen will say as ok.

She whispered then a message in his ear

And this secret was the thing that women most desired.

One year hence, when they had come to court, the knight declared,

"I've come back to the day, and to be spared,

For I am now prepared to give reply." 1025

The noble wives and maidens stood nearby,

The queen sat like a justice in her *guise*. *Fancy clothes*

All these had been assembled there to hear,

And then the knight was summoned to appear. 1030

Full silence was commanded in the court

So that the knight might openly report

The thing that worldly women love the best.

He stood not like a beast at one's behest

But quickly gave his answer loud and clear, 1035

With manly voice that all the court might hear.

"My liege and lady, generally," said he,

"What women most desire is sovereignty

Over their husbands or the ones they love,

To have the mastery, to be above. 1040

This is your most desire, though you may kill

Me if you wish. I'm here, do as you will."

No wife or maid or widow in the court

Saw fit to contradict the knight's report;

They all agreed that he gave the right answer and could live 1045

And with that word up started the old wife,

The one the knight had seen upon the *green*. *Field where he raped the first woman*

"Mercy," she said, "my sovereign lady queen!

Before your court departs, grant me my right.

It's I who taught this answer to the knight, 1050

For which he gave a solemn oath to me:

The first thing I request he'd do for me

If it's a thing that lies within his might.

Before the court I therefore pray, Sir Knight,"

She said, "that you will take me as your wife; 1055

For well you know that I have saved your life.”

The knight replied, "Alas, how *woes abuse me*! *I am doomed and sad*

Great was the woe the knight had in his head

For it was a gray and haggard wife he now had

When with his wife he'd been brought to the bed;

The knight cried “You are so old and loathsome--and descended, 1100

To add to that, from such a lowly kind--

No wonder that I toss and turn and wind.

I wish to God my heart would burst, no less!"

"Is this," she said, "the cause of your distress?"

"Why, yes," said he, "and is there any wonder?" 1105

"Choose now," she said, "one of these two: that I

Be old and ugly till the day I die, 1220

And be to you a true and humble wife,

One never to displease you all your life;

Or if you'd rather, have me young and fair,

And take your chance that I will cheat on you

Choose for yourself the one you'd rather try."

The knight gave it some thought, then gave a sigh,

And finally answered as you are to hear:

"My lady and my love and wife so dear, 1230

I leave to your wise governance the measure;

**You choose** which one would give the fullest pleasure

And honor to you, and to me as well.

I don't care which you do, you best can tell.

What you desire is good enough for me." 1235

"You've given me," she said, "the mastery? The sovereignty?

The choice is mine and all's at my behest?"

"Yes, surely, wife," said he, "I think it best."

"Then kiss me, we'll no longer fight," she said,

"For you've my oath that **I'll be both** instead-- 1240

That is to say, I'll be both good and fair."

And when the knight had truly seen all this, 1250

How she was young and fair in all her charms,

In utter joy he took her in his arms;

His heart was bathing in a bath of bliss,

A thousand kisses he began to kiss,

And she obeyed in each and every way, 1255

Whatever was his pleasure or his play.

And so they lived, till their lives' very end,

In perfect joy.

*Mr. Foster’s helpful commentary: The Wife of Bath makes her theme very clear in the conclusion of her tale (above) and in the last few lines of her story telling when she is no longer telling her story but preaching to the other pilgrims:*

And may Christ Jesus send

Us husbands meek and young and fresh abed,

And then the grace to outlive those we wed; 1260

I also pray that Jesus shorten lives

Of those who won't be governed by their wives;

Potent Summary of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”: In Arthur's day, a lusty bachelor of the king's court raped a young maiden. He was taken and condemned to die (such was the custom then) but the king, in deference to Queen Guenevere's pleas, allows the ladies to judge him. They tell him he can save his life only if a year and a day later he can tell them what it is that women most desire. He wanders long without finding the answer; he is about to return after a year, without an answer, when he comes upon an old and remarkably ugly woman. She says that if he swears to do whatever she will next ask him, she will tell him the answer. He agrees and returns with the answer: women most desire to have sovereignty over their husbands. Guenevere and her ladies are amazed; they grant him his life. The old woman then makes her demand: that he marry her. She will accept no less. On their wedding night; he turns away from her. She asks him what is the matter. He answers that she is old and ugly and low born. The old woman demonstrates to him that none of these matter -- especially noble birth, since true grace and beauty depends on deeds rather than birth. She offers him the choice: he can have her old and ugly and faithful OR young, beautiful, and possibly unchaste. He tells her to choose; he grants her the sovereignty to choose what she wants (which he learned is what women most desire). When he does so she turns into a beautiful maiden that is faithful (the best of both his choices) and they live thereafter in perfect joy.