Literary Analysis of The Wife of Bath

Plot Summary

"The Canterbury Tales" is a classic frame story written by Geoffrey Chaucer in between 1387-1400. A [frame story](https://study.com/learn/lesson/frame-narrative-overview.html) is story set within a story. In the case of "The Canterbury Tales," it is a series of many stories within one larger story. "The Canterbury Tales" tells the story of a group of 30 travelers who are taking a pilgrimage from London to Canterbury. The travelers agree to participate in a storytelling contest to entertain themselves along the course of their journey. "The Canterbury Tales" includes a prologue to each story that introduces the character telling the story, the actually story itself, and exchanges between the travelers when the stories are not being told. Some of the most famous characters from "The Canterbury Tales" are the Knight, the Merchant, and the Friar, but perhaps the best known is the Wife of Bath.

[The Wife of Bath](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-canterbury-tales/study-guide/character-list%22%20%5Cl%20%22the-wife-of-bath)'s Tale

The Wife of Bath's Tale tells a story from a distant time, when King Arthur ruled the nation and when elves used to run around impregnating women. However, the Wife immediately digresses: now friars have taken the place of elves - they are now the copulating, evil spirits.

King Arthur had a knight who, when riding home one day from hawking, found a maiden walking alone and raped her. This crime usually held the penalty of death, but, in court, the queen intervened and begged her husband to spare the knight, promising the knight that she would grant his life if he could answer the question "What do women most desire?" She gave him one year to find the answer.

The knight went on a journey but could find no satisfactory answer; some said wealth, others jollity, some status, others a good lover in bed. Despondent that he might not find his answer, the knight was mournful, when, riding beside a forest on his way back to his home, he saw a dance of twenty-four ladies. Approaching them, they vanished, and in their place, the knight found a hideous old woman, the “lothly lady”, to whom he put his question. She agreed to give the answer and assured him that it was the right one, but would only tell him the answer if he would do the next thing that she required of him. When the knight agreed, she whispered in his ear.

When they arrived at court, the knight faced the queen again, and told him that women desired to have sovereignty and “to been in maistrie” (to be in mastery) above their husbands. The lothly lady then spoke up before the court, announcing the knight’s pledge, and asking him to take her for his wife. The knight, although now pardoned, was miserable that he had to marry such an old crone, but there was no way for him to get out of it.

Privately, the knight wedded the lothly lady the next day, and the two of them lay in bed. She realized his unhappiness, and confronted him about it. He criticized her for not only being old and ugly, but low-born. She scoffed at his snobbery as a definition and defended her poverty as irrelevant to God. She then gave him a choice, making him see both sides of the argument. Either he could have her as an old and ugly wife who would be entirely faithful to him; or he could have her as a young and fair wife, who would probably cuckold him.

The knight sighed sorely, and thought, but finally told his wife to choose herself whichever option would bring most honor to the two of them. “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie” (In that case, I’ve got mastery over you) she said – and the knight agreed that she had. The lothly lady asked him to kiss her and “cast up the curtyn” (lift up the curtain) to look on her face – she had transformed into a young and beautiful woman.

Characters

The main characters in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" are the young Knight, who rapes a maiden and is sentenced to death unless he can answer the Queen's riddle; King Arthur's Queen, who opposes her husband's initial punishment for the Knight; and the Hag, who helps the Knight answer the riddle and transforms into a beautiful woman.

Themes

In the Wife of Bath's Tale, a knight sets out on a quest to find out what women want in order to prevent his own execution. He meets an old woman who gives him the answer - women desire control over their husbands. Because she gave him the answer, he must marry her. She gives him the choice to have her be a beautiful and unfaithful wife or an old but faithful wife. The knight gives her control and tells her to choose what she think is best. Because he gave her the answer she wanted, she transforms herself into a beautiful and faithful wife and the two have a long and happy marriage.

The main point of the Wife of Bath's Tale is about relations between the sexes. She sets out to prove that women desire control over their husbands most of all. She also wants to prove that it is best for everyone involved if the women are given control.