Wife of Bath.

(Source: www.sparknotes.com)

**Note to students:**

You should really read all of this document to familiarise yourselves with the Canterbury Tales. However, the bits you MUST read for the Wife of Bath assignment are marked in red (The General Prologue (page 1) for an overview of the Canterbury Tales, and the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale (page 2 is a summary and the full explanation is on pages 5 to 9).

**Plot Overview**

**READ THIS! General Prologue**

At the Tabard Inn, a tavern in Southwark, near London, the narrator joins a company of twenty-nine pilgrims. The pilgrims, like the narrator, are traveling to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator gives a descriptive account of twenty-seven of these pilgrims, including a Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant, Clerk, Man of Law, Franklin, Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Weaver, Cook, Shipman, Physician, Wife, Parson, Plowman, Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, and Host. (He does not describe the Second Nun or the Nun’s Priest, although both characters appear later in the book.) The Host, whose name, we find out in the Prologue to the Cook’s Tale, is Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He decides that each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. Whomever he judges to be the best storyteller will receive a meal at Bailey’s tavern, courtesy of the other pilgrims. The pilgrims draw lots and determine that the Knight will tell the first tale.

**The Knight’s Tale**

Theseus, duke of Athens, imprisons Arcite and Palamon, two knights from Thebes (another city in ancient Greece). From their prison, the knights see and fall in love with Theseus’s sister-in-law, Emelye. Through the intervention of a friend, Arcite is freed, but he is banished from Athens. He returns in disguise and becomes a page in Emelye’s chamber. Palamon escapes from prison, and the two meet and fight over Emelye. Theseus apprehends them and arranges a tournament between the two knights and their allies, with Emelye as the prize. Arcite wins, but he is accidentally thrown from his horse and dies. Palamon then marries Emelye.

**The Miller’s Prologue and Tale**

The Host asks the Monk to tell the next tale, but the drunken Miller interrupts and insists that his tale should be the next. He tells the story of an impoverished student named Nicholas, who persuades his landlord’s sexy young wife, Alisoun, to spend the night with him. He convinces his landlord, a carpenter named John, that the second flood is coming, and tricks him into spending the night in a tub hanging from the ceiling of his barn. Absolon, a young parish clerk who is also in love with Alisoun, appears outside the window of the room where Nicholas and Alisoun lie together. When Absolon begs Alisoun for a kiss, she sticks her rear end out the window in the dark and lets him kiss it. Absolon runs and gets a red-hot poker, returns to the window, and asks for another kiss; when Nicholas sticks his bottom out the window and farts, Absolon brands him on the buttocks. Nicholas’s cries for water make the carpenter think that the flood has come, so the carpenter cuts the rope connecting his tub to the ceiling, falls down, and breaks his arm.

**The Reeve’s Prologue and Tale**

Because he also does carpentry, the Reeve takes offense at the Miller’s tale of a stupid carpenter, and counters with his own tale of a dishonest miller. The Reeve tells the story of two students, John and Alayn, who go to the mill to watch the miller grind their corn, so that he won’t have a chance to steal any. But the miller unties their horse, and while they chase it, he steals some of the flour he has just ground for them. By the time the students catch the horse, it is dark, so they spend the night in the miller’s house. That night, Alayn seduces the miller’s daughter, and John seduces his wife. When the miller wakes up and finds out what has happened, he tries to beat the students. His wife, thinking that her husband is actually one of the students, hits the miller over the head with a staff. The students take back their stolen goods and leave.

**The Cook’s Prologue and Tale**

The Cook particularly enjoys the Reeve’s Tale, and offers to tell another funny tale. The tale concerns an apprentice named Perkyn who drinks and dances so much that he is called “Perkyn Reveler.” Finally, Perkyn’s master decides that he would rather his apprentice leave to revel than stay home and corrupt the other servants. Perkyn arranges to stay with a friend who loves drinking and gambling, and who has a wife who is a prostitute. The tale breaks off, unfinished, after fifty-eight lines.

**The Man of Law’s Introduction, Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue**

The Host reminds his fellow pilgrims to waste no time, because lost time cannot be regained. He asks the Man of Law to tell the next tale. The Man of Law agrees, apologizing that he cannot tell any suitable tale that Chaucer has not already told—Chaucer may be unskilled as a poet, says the Man of Law, but he has told more stories of lovers than Ovid, and he doesn’t print tales of incest as John Gower does (Gower was a contemporary of Chaucer). In the Prologue to his tale, the Man of Law laments the miseries of poverty. He then remarks how fortunate merchants are, and says that his tale is one told to him by a merchant.

In the tale, the Muslim sultan of Syria converts his entire sultanate (including himself) to Christianity in order to persuade the emperor of Rome to give him his daughter, Custance, in marriage. The sultan’s mother and her attendants remain secretly faithful to Islam. The mother tells her son she wishes to hold a banquet for him and all the Christians. At the banquet, she massacres her son and all the Christians except for Custance, whom she sets adrift in a rudderless ship. After years of floating, Custance runs ashore in Northumberland, where a constable and his wife, Hermengyld, offer her shelter. She converts them to Christianity.

One night, Satan makes a young knight sneak into Hermengyld’s chamber and murder Hermengyld. He places the bloody knife next to Custance, who sleeps in the same chamber. When the constable returns home, accompanied by Alla, the king of Northumberland, he finds his slain wife. He tells Alla the story of how Custance was found, and Alla begins to pity the girl. He decides to look more deeply into the murder. Just as the knight who murdered Hermengyld is swearing that Custance is the true murderer, he is struck down and his eyes burst out of his face, proving his guilt to Alla and the crowd. The knight is executed, Alla and many others convert to Christianity, and Custance and Alla marry.

While Alla is away in Scotland, Custance gives birth to a boy named Mauricius. Alla’s mother, Donegild, intercepts a letter from Custance to Alla and substitutes a counterfeit one that claims that the child is disfigured and bewitched. She then intercepts Alla’s reply, which claims that the child should be kept and loved no matter how malformed. Donegild substitutes a letter saying that Custance and her son are banished and should be sent away on the same ship on which Custance arrived. Alla returns home, finds out what has happened, and kills Donegild.

After many adventures at sea, including an attempted rape, Custance ends up back in Rome, where she reunites with Alla, who has made a pilgrimage there to atone for killing his mother. She also reunites with her father, the emperor. Alla and Custance return to England, but Alla dies after a year, so Custance returns, once more, to Rome. Mauricius becomes the next Roman emperor.

Following the Man of Law’s Tale, the Host asks the Parson to tell the next tale, but the Parson reproaches him for swearing, and they fall to bickering.

**READ THIS! The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale**

The Wife of Bath gives a lengthy account of her feelings about marriage. Quoting from the Bible, the Wife argues against those who believe it is wrong to marry more than once, and she explains how she dominated and controlled each of her five husbands. She married her fifth husband, Jankyn, for love instead of money. After the Wife has rambled on for a while, the Friar butts in to complain that she is taking too long, and the Summoner retorts that friars are like flies, always meddling. The Friar promises to tell a tale about a summoner, and the Summoner promises to tell a tale about a friar. The Host cries for everyone to quiet down and allow the Wife to commence her tale.

In her tale, a young knight of King Arthur’s court rapes a maiden; to atone for his crime, Arthur’s queen sends him on a quest to discover what women want most. An ugly old woman promises the knight that she will tell him the secret if he promises to do whatever she wants for saving his life. He agrees, and she tells him women want control of their husbands and their own lives. They go together to Arthur’s queen, and the old woman’s answer turns out to be correct. The old woman then tells the knight that he must marry her. When the knight confesses later that he is repulsed by her appearance, she gives him a choice: she can either be ugly and faithful, or beautiful and unfaithful. The knight tells her to make the choice herself, and she rewards him for giving her control of the marriage by rendering herself both beautiful *and* faithful.

**The Friar’s Prologue and Tale**

The Friar speaks approvingly of the Wife of Bath’s Tale, and offers to lighten things up for the company by telling a funny story about a lecherous summoner. The Summoner does not object, but he promises to pay the Friar back in his own tale. The Friar tells of an archdeacon who carries out the law without mercy, especially to lechers. The archdeacon has a summoner who has a network of spies working for him, to let him know who has been lecherous. The summoner extorts money from those he’s sent to summon, charging them more money than he should for penance. He tries to serve a summons on a yeoman who is actually a devil in disguise. After comparing notes on their treachery and extortion, the devil vanishes, but when the summoner tries to prosecute an old wealthy widow unfairly, the widow cries out that the summoner should be taken to hell. The devil follows the woman’s instructions and drags the summoner off to hell.

**The Summoner’s Prologue and Tale**

The Summoner, furious at the Friar’s Tale, asks the company to let him tell the next tale. First, he tells the company that there is little difference between friars and fiends, and that when an angel took a friar down to hell to show him the torments there, the friar asked why there were no friars in hell; the angel then pulled up Satan’s tail and 20,000 friars came out of his ass.

In the Summoner’s Tale, a friar begs for money from a dying man named Thomas and his wife, who have recently lost their child. The friar shamelessly exploits the couple’s misfortunes to extract money from them, so Thomas tells the friar that he is sitting on something that he will bequeath to the friars. The friar reaches for his bequest, and Thomas lets out an enormous fart. The friar complains to the lord of the manor, whose squire promises to divide the fart evenly among all the friars.

**The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale**

The Host asks the Clerk to cheer up and tell a merry tale, and the Clerk agrees to tell a tale by the Italian poet Petrarch. Griselde is a hardworking peasant who marries into the aristocracy. Her husband tests her fortitude in several ways, including pretending to kill her children and divorcing her. He punishes her one final time by forcing her to prepare for his wedding to a new wife. She does all this dutifully, her husband tells her that she has always been and will always be his wife (the divorce was a fraud), and they live happily ever after.

**The Merchant’s Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue**

The Merchant reflects on the great difference between the patient Griselde of the Clerk’s Tale and the horrible shrew he has been married to for the past two months. The Host asks him to tell a story of the evils of marriage, and he complies. Against the advice of his friends, an old knight named January marries May, a beautiful young woman. She is less than impressed by his enthusiastic sexual efforts, and conspires to cheat on him with his squire, Damien. When blind January takes May into his garden to copulate with her, she tells him she wants to eat a pear, and he helps her up into the pear tree, where she has sex with Damien. Pluto, the king of the faeries, restores January’s sight, but May, caught in the act, assures him that he must still be blind. The Host prays to God to keep him from marrying a wife like the one the Merchant describes.

**The Squire’s Introduction and Tale**

The Host calls upon the Squire to say something about his favorite subject, love, and the Squire willingly complies. King Cambyuskan of the Mongol Empire is visited on his birthday by a knight bearing gifts from the king of Arabia and India. He gives Cambyuskan and his daughter Canacee a magic brass horse, a magic mirror, a magic ring that gives Canacee the ability to understand the language of birds, and a sword with the power to cure any wound it creates. She rescues a dying female falcon that narrates how her consort abandoned her for the love of another. The Squire’s Tale is either unfinished by Chaucer or is meant to be interrupted by the Franklin, who interjects that he wishes his own son were as eloquent as the Squire. The Host expresses annoyance at the Franklin’s interruption, and orders him to begin the next tale.

**The Franklin’s Prologue and Tale**

The Franklin says that his tale is a familiar Breton lay, a folk ballad of ancient Brittany. Dorigen, the heroine, awaits the return of her husband, Arveragus, who has gone to England to win honor in feats of arms. She worries that the ship bringing her husband home will wreck itself on the coastal rocks, and she promises Aurelius, a young man who falls in love with her, that she will give her body to him if he clears the rocks from the coast. Aurelius hires a student learned in magic to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared. Arveragus returns home and tells his wife that she must keep her promise to Aurelius. Aurelius is so impressed by Arveragus’s honorable act that he generously absolves her of the promise, and the magician, in turn, generously absolves Aurelius of the money he owes.

**The Physician’s Tale**

Appius the judge lusts after Virginia, the beautiful daughter of Virginius. Appius persuades a churl named Claudius to declare her his slave, stolen from him by Virginius. Appius declares that Virginius must hand over his daughter to Claudius. Virginius tells his daughter that she must die rather than suffer dishonor, and she virtuously consents to her father’s cutting her head off. Appius sentences Virginius to death, but the Roman people, aware of Appius’s hijinks, throw him into prison, where he kills himself.

**The Pardoner’s Introduction, Prologue, and Tale**

The Host is dismayed by the tragic injustice of the Physician’s Tale, and asks the Pardoner to tell something merry. The other pilgrims contradict the Host, demanding a moral tale, which the Pardoner agrees to tell after he eats and drinks. The Pardoner tells the company how he cheats people out of their money by preaching that money is the root of all evil. His tale describes three riotous youths who go looking for Death, thinking that they can kill him. An old man tells them that they will find Death under a tree. Instead, they find eight bushels of gold, which they plot to sneak into town under cover of darkness. The youngest goes into town to fetch food and drink, but brings back poison, hoping to have the gold all to himself. His companions kill him to enrich their own shares, then drink the poison and die under the tree. His tale complete, the Pardoner offers to sell the pilgrims pardons, and singles out the Host to come kiss his relics. The Host infuriates the Pardoner by accusing him of fraud, but the Knight persuades the two to kiss and bury their differences.

**The Shipman’s Tale**

The Shipman’s Tale features a monk who tricks a merchant’s wife into having sex with him by borrowing money from the merchant, then giving it to the wife so she can repay her own debt to her husband, in exchange for sexual favors. When the monk sees the merchant next, he tells him that he returned the merchant’s money to his wife. The wife realizes she has been duped, but she boldly tells her husband to forgive her debt: she will repay it in bed. The Host praises the Shipman’s story, and asks the Prioress for a tale.

**The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale**

The Prioress calls on the Virgin Mary to guide her tale. In an Asian city, a Christian school is located at the edge of a Jewish ghetto. An angelic seven-year-old boy, a widow’s son, attends the school. He is a devout Christian, and loves to sing *Alma Redemptoris* (Gracious Mother of the Redeemer). Singing the song on his way through the ghetto, some Jews hire a murderer to slit his throat and throw him into a latrine. The Jews refuse to tell the widow where her son is, but he miraculously begins to sing *Alma Redemptoris,* so the Christian people recover his body, and the magistrate orders the murdering Jews to be drawn apart by wild horses and then hanged.

**The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas**

The Host, after teasing Chaucer the narrator about his appearance, asks him to tell a tale. Chaucer says that he only knows one tale, then launches into a parody of bad poetry—the Tale of Sir Thopas. Sir Thopas rides about looking for an elf-queen to marry until he is confronted by a giant. The narrator’s doggerel continues in this vein until the Host can bear no more and interrupts him. Chaucer asks him why he can’t tell his tale, since it is the best he knows, and the Host explains that his rhyme isn’t worth a turd. He encourages Chaucer to tell a prose tale.

**The Tale of Melibee**

Chaucer’s second tale is the long, moral prose story of Melibee. Melibee’s house is raided by his foes, who beat his wife, Prudence, and severely wound his daughter, Sophie, in her feet, hands, ears, nose, and mouth. Prudence advises him not to rashly pursue vengeance on his enemies, and he follows her advice, putting his foes’ punishment in her hands. She forgives them for the outrages done to her, in a model of Christian forbearance and forgiveness.

**The Monk’s Prologue and Tale**

The Host wishes that his own wife were as patient as Melibee’s, and calls upon the Monk to tell the next tale. First he teases the Monk, pointing out that the Monk is clearly no poor cloisterer. The Monk takes it all in stride and tells a series of tragic falls, in which noble figures are brought low: Lucifer, Adam, Sampson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Zenobia, Pedro of Castile, and down through the ages.

**The Nun’s Priest’s Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue**

After seventeen noble “falls” narrated by the Monk, the Knight interrupts, and the Host calls upon the Nun’s Priest to deliver something more lively. The Nun’s Priest tells of Chanticleer the Rooster, who is carried off by a flattering fox who tricks him into closing his eyes and displaying his crowing abilities. Chanticleer turns the tables on the fox by persuading him to open his mouth and brag to the barnyard about his feat, upon which Chanticleer falls out of the fox’s mouth and escapes. The Host praises the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, adding that if the Nun’s Priest were not in holy orders, he would be as sexually potent as Chanticleer.

**The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale**

In her Prologue, the Second Nun explains that she will tell a saint’s life, that of Saint Cecilia, for this saint set an excellent example through her good works and wise teachings. She focuses particularly on the story of Saint Cecilia’s martyrdom. Before Cecilia’s new husband, Valerian, can take her virginity, she sends him on a pilgrimage to Pope Urban, who converts him to Christianity. An angel visits Valerian, who asks that his brother Tiburce be granted the grace of Christian conversion as well. All three—Cecilia, Tiburce, and Valerian—are put to death by the Romans.

**The Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue and Tale**

When the Second Nun’s Tale is finished, the company is overtaken by a black-clad Canon and his Yeoman, who have heard of the pilgrims and their tales and wish to participate. The Yeoman brags to the company about how he and the Canon create the illusion that they are alchemists, and the Canon departs in shame at having his secrets discovered. The Yeoman tells a tale of how a canon defrauded a priest by creating the illusion of alchemy using sleight of hand.

**The Manciple’s Prologue and Tale**

The Host pokes fun at the Cook, riding at the back of the company, blind drunk. The Cook is unable to honor the Host’s request that he tell a tale, and the Manciple criticizes him for his drunkenness. The Manciple relates the legend of a white crow, taken from the Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights.* In it, Phoebus’s talking white crow informs him that his wife is cheating on him. Phoebus kills the wife, pulls out the crow’s white feathers, and curses it with blackness.

**The Parson’s Prologue and Tale**

As the company enters a village in the late afternoon, the Host calls upon the Parson to give them a fable. Refusing to tell a fictional story because it would go against the rule set by St. Paul, the Parson delivers a lengthy treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins, instead.

**Chaucer’s Retraction**

Chaucer appeals to readers to credit Jesus Christ as the inspiration for anything in his book that they like, and to attribute what they don’t like to his own ignorance and lack of ability. He retracts and prays for forgiveness for all of his works dealing with secular and pagan subjects, asking only to be remembered for what he has written of saints’ lives and homilies

**READ ALL OF THIS BELOW! The Wife of Bath’s Prologue**

*From the beginning through the Wife of Bath’s description of her first three husbands Fragment 3, lines 1–451*

**Summary**

The Wife of Bath begins the Prologue to her tale by establishing herself as an authority on marriage, due to her extensive personal experience with the institution. Since her first marriage at the tender age of twelve, she has had five husbands. She says that many people have criticized her for her numerous marriages, most of them on the basis that Christ went only once to a wedding, at Cana in Galilee. The Wife of Bath has her own views of Scripture and God’s plan. She says that men can only guess and interpret what Jesus meant when he told a Samaritan woman that her fifth husband was not her husband. With or without this bit of Scripture, no man has ever been able to give her an exact reply when she asks to know how many husbands a woman may have in her lifetime. God bade us to wax fruitful and multiply, she says, and that is the text that she wholeheartedly endorses. After all, great Old Testament figures, like Abraham, Jacob, and Solomon, enjoyed multiple wives at once. She admits that many great Fathers of the Church have proclaimed the importance of virginity, such as the Apostle Paul. But, she reasons, even if virginity is important, someone must be procreating so that virgins can be created. Leave virginity to the perfect, she says, and let the rest of us use our gifts as best we may—and her gift, doubtless, is her sexual power. She uses this power as an “instrument” to control her husbands.

At this point, the Pardoner interrupts. He is planning to marry soon and worries that his wife will control his body, as the Wife of Bath describes. The Wife of Bath tells him to have patience and to listen to the whole tale to see if it reveals the truth about marriage. Of her five husbands, three have been “good” and two have been “bad.” The first three were good, she admits, mostly because they were rich, old, and submissive. She laughs to recall the torments that she put these men through and recounts a typical conversation that she had with her older husbands. She would accuse her -husband of having an affair, launching into a tirade in which she would charge him with a bewildering array of accusations. If one of her husbands got drunk, she would claim he said that every wife is out to destroy her husband. He would then feel guilty and give her what she wanted. All of this, the Wife of Bath tells the rest of the pilgrims, was a pack of lies—her husbands never held these opinions, but she made these claims to give them grief. Worse, she would tease her husbands in bed, refusing to give them full satisfaction until they promised her money. She admits proudly to using her verbal and sexual power to bring her husbands to total submission.

**Analysis**

In her lengthy Prologue, the Wife of Bath recites her autobiography, announcing in her very first word that “experience”will be her guide. Yet, despite her claim that experience is her sole authority, the Wife of Bath apparently feels the need to establish her authority in a more scholarly way. She imitates the ways of churchmen and scholars by backing up her claims with quotations from Scripture and works of antiquity. The Wife carelessly flings around references as textual evidence to buttress her argument, most of which don’t really correspond to her points. Her reference to Ptolemy’s *Almageste,* for instance, is completely erroneous—the phrase she attributes to that book appears nowhere in the work. Although her many errors display her lack of real scholarship, they also convey Chaucer’s mockery of the churchmen present, who often misused Scripture to justify their devious actions.

The text of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue is based in the medieval genre of allegorical “confession.” In a morality play, a personified vice such as Gluttony or Lust “confesses” his or her sins to the audience in a life story. The Wife is exactly what the medieval Church saw as a “wicked woman,” and she is proud of it—from the very beginning, her speech has undertones of conflict with her patriarchal society. Because the statements that the Wife of Bath attributes to her husbands were taken from a number of satires published in Chaucer’s time, which half-comically portrayed women as unfaithful, superficial, evil creatures, always out to undermine their husbands, feminist critics have often tried to portray the Wife as one of the first feminist characters in literature.

This interpretation is weakened by the fact that the Wife of Bath herself conforms to a number of these misogynist and misogamist (antimarriage) stereotypes. For example, she describes herself as sexually voracious but at the same time as someone who only has sex to get money, thereby combining two contradictory stereotypes. She also describes how she dominated her husband, playing on a fear that was common to men, as the Pardoner’s nervous interjection reveals. Despite their contradictions, all of these ideas about women were used by men to support a hierarchy in which men dominated women

**Summary**

The Wife of Bath begins her description of her two “bad”husbands. Her fourth husband, whom she married when still young, was a reveler, and he had a “paramour,” or mistress (454). Remembering her wild youth, she becomes wistful as she describes the dancing and singing in which she and her fourth husband used to indulge. Her nostalgia reminds her of how old she has become, but she says that she pays her loss of beauty no mind. She will try to be merry, for, though she has lost her “flour,” she will try to sell the “bran” that remains. Realizing that she has digressed, she returns to the story of her fourth husband. She confesses that she was his purgatory on Earth, always trying to make him jealous. He died while she was on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Of her fifth husband, she has much more to say. She loved him, even though he treated her horribly and beat her. He was coy and flattering in bed, and always won her back. Women, the Wife says, always desire what is forbidden them, and run away from whatever pursues or is forced upon them. This husband was also different from the other four because she married him for love, not money. He was a poor ex-student who boarded with the Wife’s friend and confidante.

When she first met this fifth husband, Jankyn, she was still married to her fourth. While walking with him one day, she told him that she would marry him if she were widowed. She lied to him and told him he had enchanted her, and that she had dreamed that he would kill her as she slept, filling her bed with blood, which signifies gold. But, she confides to her listeners, all of this was false: she never had such a dream. She loses her place in the story momentarily, then resumes with her fourth husband’s funeral. She made a big show of crying, although, she admits, she actually cried very little since she already had a new husband lined up.

As she watched Jankyn carry her husband’s casket, she fell in love with him. He was only twenty and she forty, but she was always a lusty woman and thought she could handle his youth. But, she says, she came to regret the age difference, because he would not suffer her abuse like her past husbands and gave some of his own abuse in return. He had a “book of wicked wives” she recalls, called *Valerie and Theofraste.* This book contained the stories of the most deceitful wives in history. It began with Eve, who brought all mankind into sin by first taking the apple in the Garden of Eden; from there, it chronicled Delilah’s betrayal of Samson, Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon, and other famous stories. Jankyn would torment the Wife of Bath (whom we learn in line 804 is named Alisoun) by reading out of this book at night.

One evening, out of frustration, the Wife tears three pages out of the book and punches Jankyn in the face. Jankyn repays her by striking her on the head, which is the reason, she explains in line 636, that she is now deaf in one ear. She cries out that she wants to kiss him before she dies, but when he comes over, she hits him again. They finally manage a truce, in which he hands over all of his meager estate to her, and she acts kindly and loving.

Her tale of her marriages finished, the Wife announces that she will tell her story, eliciting laughter from the Friar, who exclaims, “This is a long preamble of a tale!” (831). The Summoner tells him to shut up, and they exchange some angry words. The Host quiets everybody down and allows the Wife of Bath to begin her story.

**Analysis**

In her discussion of her fourth and fifth husbands, the Wife of Bath begins to let her true feelings show through her argumentative rhetoric. Her language becomes even less controlled, and she loses her place several times (at line 585, for instance), as she begins to react to her own story, allowing her words to affect her own train of thought. Her sensitivity about her age begins to show through, and, as she reveals psychological depth, she becomes a more realistic, sympathetic, and compelling character.

When the Wife of Bath describes how she fell in love with her fifth husband, despite her pragmatism, she reveals her softer side. She recognizes that he used the same tactics against her as she used against other men, but she cannot stop herself from desiring him. Jankyn even uses one of the satires against women to aggravate her, the kind of satire that the Wife mocked earlier in her Prologue. Despite all this, we can see that Jankyn, though the most aggravating of her husbands, is the only one that she admits she truly loved. Even as she brags about her shameless manipulation of her husbands and claims that her sexual powers can conquer anyone, she retains a deep fondness for the one man she could not control.

The Wife seems to enjoy the act of arguing more than the end of deriving an answer by logic. To explain why clerks (meaning church writers) treat wives so badly, for example, she employs three different arguments. First, she blames the entire religious establishment, claiming that church writings breed hostility toward wives because they were written by men (690–696). Then, she gives an astrological explanation, asserting that the children of Mercury (scholars) and of Venus (lovers) always contradict one another. A third reason she gives is that when clerks grow old, their impotence and decreased virility makes them hostile and slanderous toward wives (705–710).

Twice in her Prologue, the Wife calls attention to her habit of lying—“and al was fals,” she states (382, 582). These statements certainly highlight our awareness of the fact that she’s giving a performance, and they also put her entire life story in question. We are left wondering to what extent we should even believe the “experience” of the Wife of Bath, and whether she is not, in fact, a mean-spirited satire on Chaucer’s part, meant to represent the fickleness of women.

**READ ALL OF THIS BELOW! The Wife of Bath’s Tale**

*Fragment 3, lines 857–1264*

**Summary**

In the days of King Arthur, the Wife of Bath begins, the isle of Britain was full of fairies and elves. Now, those creatures are gone because their spots have been taken by the friars and other mendicants that seem to fill every nook and cranny of the isle. And though the friars rape women, just as the incubi did in the days of the fairies, the friars only cause women dishonor—the incubi always got them pregnant.

In Arthur’s court, however, a young, lusty knight comes across a beautiful young maiden one day. Overcome by lust and his sense of his own power, he rapes her. The court is scandalized by the crime and decrees that the knight should be put to death by decapitation. However, Arthur’s queen and other ladies of the court intercede on his behalf and ask the king to give him one chance to save his own life. Arthur, wisely obedient to wifely counsel, grants their request. The queen presents the knight with the following challenge: if, within one year, he can discover what women want most in the world and report his findings back to the court, he will keep his life. If he cannot find the answer to the queen’s question, or if his answer is wrong, he will lose his head.

The knight sets forth in sorrow. He roams throughout the country, posing the question to every woman he meets. To the knight’s dismay, nearly every one of them answers differently. Some claim that women love money best, some honor, some jolliness, some looks, some sex, some remarriage, some flattery, and some say that women most want to be free to do as they wish. Finally, says the Wife, some say that women most want to be considered discreet and secretive, although she argues that such an answer is clearly untrue, since no woman can keep a secret. As proof, she retells Ovid’s story of Midas. Midas had two ass’s ears growing under his hair, which he concealed from everybody except his wife, whom he begged not to disclose his secret. She swore she would not, but the secret burned so much inside her that she ran down to a marsh and whispered her husband’s secret to the water. The Wife then says that if her listeners would like to hear how the tale ends, they should read Ovid.

She returns to her story of the knight. When his day of judgment draws near, the knight sorrowfully heads for home. As he rides near a forest, he sees a large group of women dancing and decides to approach them to ask his question. But as he approaches, the group vanishes, and all he can see is an ugly old woman. The woman asks if she can be of help, and the knight explains his predicament and promises to reward her if she can help him. The woman tells the knight that he must pledge himself to her in return for her help, and the knight, having no options left, gladly consents. She then guarantees that his life will be saved.

The knight and the old woman travel together to the court, where, in front of a large audience, the knight tells the queen the answer with which the old woman supplied him: what women most desire is to be in charge of their husbands and lovers. The women agree resoundingly that this is the answer, and the queen spares the knight’s life. The old hag comes forth and publicly asks the knight to marry her. The knight cries out in horror. He begs her to take his material possessions rather than his body, but she refuses to yield, and in the end he is forced to consent. The two are married in a small, private wedding and go to bed together the same night. Throughout the entire ordeal, the knight remains miserable.

While in bed, the loathsome hag asks the knight why he is so sad. He replies that he could hardly bear the shame of having such an ugly, lowborn wife. She does not take offense at the insult, but calmly asks him whether real “gentillesse,” or noble character, can be hereditary (1109). There have been sons of noble fathers, she argues, who were shameful and villainous, though they shared the same blood. Her family may be poor, but real poverty lies in covetousness, and real riches lie in having little and wanting nothing. She offers the knight a choice: either he can have her be ugly but loyal and good, or he can have her young and fair but also coquettish and unfaithful. The knight ponders in silence. Finally, he replies that he would rather trust her judgment, and he asks her to choose whatever she thinks best. Because the knight’s answer gave the woman what she most desired, the authority to choose for herself, she becomes both beautiful *and* good. The two have a long, happy marriage, and the woman becomes completely obedient to her husband. The Wife of Bath concludes with a plea that Jesus Christ send all women husbands who are young, meek, and fresh in bed, and the grace to outlive their husbands.

**Analysis**

*“Wommen desiren to have sovereyntee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above.”*

The tale the Wife of Bath tells about the transformation of an old hag into a beautiful maid was quite well known in folk legend and poetry. One of Chaucer’s contemporaries, the poet John Gower, wrote a version of the same tale that was very popular in Chaucer’s time. But whereas the moral of the folk tale of the loathsome hag is that true beauty lies within, the Wife of Bath arrives at such a conclusion only incidentally. Her message is that, ugly or fair, women should be obeyed in all things by their husbands.

The old hag might be intended to represent the Wife of Bath herself, at least as she would like others to see her. Though the hag has aged, she is capable of displaying all of the vigor and inner beauty of her youth if the right man comes along, just as the Wife did with her fifth and favorite husband, the youthful Jankyn. Although the old hag becomes a beautiful young woman in response to the young knight’s well-timed response, it is unclear whether he truly had enough respect for the old woman that he allowed her to choose for herself, or whether he had simply learned how to supply her with the correct answer.

If we agree with the former, we may see the Wife as an idealistic character who believes that bad men can change. If we choose the latter, the Wife becomes a much more cynical character, inclined to mistrust all men. In the second interpretation, both transformations—the knight’s shallow change in behavior (but not in soul) and the hag’s transformation into the physical object of desires—are only skin deep. Perhaps she is giving him exactly what he deserves: superficiality.

The Wife begins her tale by depicting the golden age of King Arthur as one that was both more perilous and more full of opportunity for women. Every time a woman traveled alone, the Wife suggests, she was in danger of encountering an *incubus,* or an evil spirit who would seduce women (880). But the society is also highly matriarchal. After the knight commits a rape, the king hands him over to Arthur’s queen, who decides to send him on an educational quest. His education comes through women, and the queen’s challenge puts him in a situation where what is traditionally thought of as a shortcoming—a woman’s inability to keep a secret—is the only thing that can save him. The Wife’s digression about King Midas may also be slightly subversive. Instead of finishing the story, she directs the reader to Ovid. In Ovid’s version of the story, the only person who knows about Midas’s ass’s ears is not his wife but his barber. The wife could, therefore, be slyly trying to point out that men, too, are gossip.