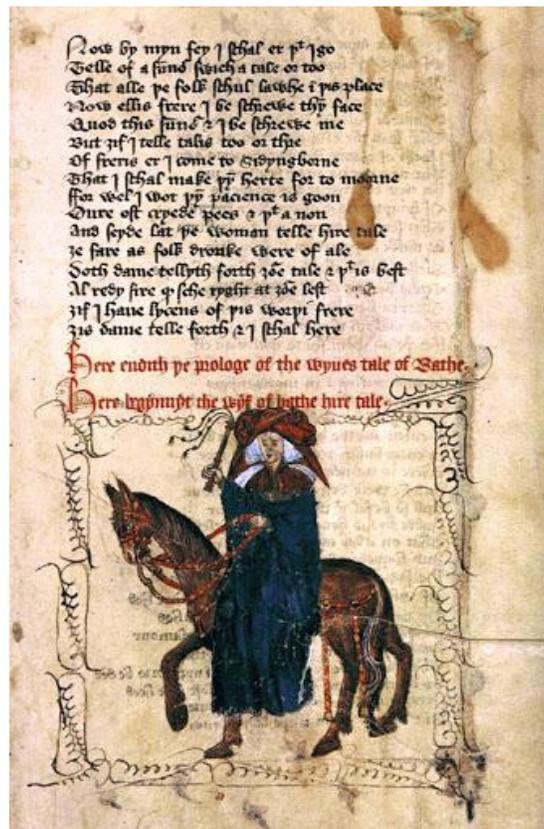


The Canterbury Tales: The Wife of Bath's Tale

Introduction

Like the other tales we've read so far, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* takes place in a setting far removed from the setting of *The General Prologue*—this time, the tale takes place within King Arthur's court, which is reminiscent of earlier medieval tales like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Like those great medieval romances, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* follows a knight on a quest for knowledge that will ultimately save his life. The narrator, the Wife of Bath herself, often interrupts her telling of this story with her own opinions of the characters and to tell other smaller tales from great Renaissance poets, and her distinct voice ultimately alters the larger message of her tale.



A recreation of the original manuscript of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.
(Source: The Huntington Library)

Historical Setting and Context

Although the Wife of Bath gives no specific time period for her tale, she does say that it takes place sometime during King Arthur's reign in England. If you're familiar with the story of *The Legend of King Arthur* (or Disney's film adaptation, *The Sword in the Stone*), you'll remember that King Arthur was once a peasant boy who won the throne by being the only man strong enough to pull a sword from a stone. Once he was coronated, King Arthur put together a famous Round Table of knights renowned for their bravery, physical prowess, and loyalty to their king. Knights are often thought to be paragons of virtue; however, stories like *The Wife of Bath's Tale* show that knights, too, fall victim to their vices and must face the consequences (although they are often acquitted for their crime in the end).

For more information on Chaucer's user of Arthurian Legend, [please visit this website](#).

Characters

Below is a brief description of each major character in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.

The Knight- a member of King Arthur's round table who must answer to the court after raping a maiden and goes on a quest for knowledge to avoid the death penalty.

The Queen- the wife of King Arthur who has pity on the knight and gives him a quest so he can avoid the death penalty.

The Old, Ugly Woman- a woman living in the woods who barter the knowledge that the knight for in exchange for any favor. She ultimately decides that the knight must marry her in exchange for the knowledge.

Reading and Comprehension Questions

Answer the following questions with evidence from the text.

1. In the opening of her tale, the Wife of Bath remarks that there aren't magical creatures lurking in the forest anymore—women only need to worry about priests and friars hiding around (ll.16-24). What is her criticism of these clergymen?
 - a. How does this criticism compare to that we receive of the Monk and the Friar in *The General Prologue*?
2. How does the collective court's view of the Knight's crime differ from the view held by the Queen and her attendants?
3. What quest does the Queen give to the Knight so he can avoid the death penalty? How long does he have to complete this quest?
4. The Knight receives several different answers to his question in ll. 69-93. Which answer does the Wife of Bath feel is most convincing and why?
5. The Wife of Bath interrupts her tale to tell another story by the Roman poet Ovid. Why does she feel this is necessary? What point is she trying to make?
6. What is the stipulation that the Old, Ugly Woman gives the Knight before she answers his question?
 - a. What is it that all women want most?
7. According to the Old, Ugly Woman, what truly makes people noble? How does she support her claim?

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8. Reread II. What point is the old woman trying to make about poverty?
 - a. Why might this point be considered radical at the time it was written?
9. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is often thought to be proto feminist, meaning that it expresses ideas that today's readers would consider to be feminist before feminism was an established belief system. Do you agree with this interpretation of the text? Why or why not?