

## **The Wife of Bath's Tale Answer Guide**

- 1. In the opening of her tale, the Wife of Bath remarks that there aren't magical creatures lurking in the forest anymore— rather than imps and demons, women only need to worry about priests and friars hiding around (II.16-24). What is her criticism of these clergymen?**

**Sample Answer:** The Wife of Bath is implying that instead of listening to confessions or assisting with mass, these clergymen are out antagonizing women. She refers to the priests and friars as “seducing spirits,” meaning that they were probably trying to sleep with women. These clergymen obviously don't have the wellbeing of the parishioners at the forefront of their minds.

- a. How does this criticism compare to that we receive of the Monk and the Friar in *The General Prologue*?**

**Sample Answer:** In *The General Prologue*, the narrator also implies that the Monk and the Friar are more concerned with their own wellbeing than that of their parishioners. However, the Monk and Friar are more interested in cajoling money from poor people, while the priests and friar in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* appear focused on philandering.

- 2. How does the collective court's view of the Knight's crime differ from the view held by the Queen and her attendants? Why do you think the Queen holds this opinion?**

**Answer Tip:** Reread II. 39-44 and focus on the description of the knight in the beginning of the tale to answer the second question.

- 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?**

**Answer Hint:** Reread II. 47-53.

- 4. The Knight receives several different answers to his question in II. 69-93. Which answer does the Wife of Bath feel is most convincing and why?**

**Sample Answer:** The Wife of Bath thinks that the most convincing answer is that women want most to be “flattered and spoiled” (l. 75). She says that even the

weakest and least impressive men can catch a woman “with flattery/and with attentions, and with thoughtful acts” (ll. 76-77).

- 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?**

**Answer Tip:** Consider the context of what the Wife of Bath is saying prior to summarizing Ovid when crafting your answer. What is her main point? What is the main point of the Ovid story? How are those two points similar?

- 6. What stipulation does the Old, Ugly Woman give the Knight before she answers his question?**

**Answer Hint:** Look back at ll. 156-156.

- a. **What is it that all women want most? Why might this be upsetting to men?**

**Sample Answer:** The Old, Ugly Woman tells the Knight that what all women want most is “to have sovereignty/ Over their husbands as much as their lovers/ And to be masters of them” (ll. 184-184). This means that all women want rule over their husbands or lovers as a king would rule over his people. They want to have complete control of the relationship, and this kind of power is usually delegated to men.

For more information on female agency and The Wife of Bath, [please visit this website.](#)

- 7. According to the Old, Ugly Woman, what truly makes people noble? How does she support her claim?**

**Answer Tip:** Look back at ll. 254-276 and ll. 291-308

- 8. Reread ll. 321-356 What point is the old woman trying to make about poverty?**

**Answer Hint:** Use your close reading skills to answer this question!

- a. **Why might this point be considered radical at the time it was written?**

**Answer Tip:** Think about the religious allusions the Old, Ugly Woman uses in supporting her claim. How does view of traditional Christian values

differ from the values expressed by the clergymen earlier in this tale and in *The General Prologue*?

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?**

**Answer Tip:** The question of whether *The Wife of Bath* can be considered feminist is still a hot-button topic in academia to this day. You will have to rely on your own interpretation of the text and basic understanding of feminism in order to answer this question; as long as your claim is logical, and you use evidence from the text to support your answer, you should be fine.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- *The Wife of Bath's Tale* contains many feminist notions despite being written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century; The Wife of Bath herself is very well-read and seems to be educated, she is fully in-touch with her own sense of sexuality, and her story encourages men to let women have some agency in their relationships. For more information on *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a feminist text, [please visit this website](#).
- While *The Wife of Bath's Tale* may appear to be a proto feminist on the surface, it ultimately rewards a man for raping a maiden by giving him a wife who is beautiful and loyal. Also, it may be unrealistic and inaccurate to place the label "feminist" on a text that was written hundreds of years before feminist ideology was established; theorist Jack Halberstam calls this phenomenon "perverse presentism." For more information on this viewpoint, [please visit this website](#).