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| **“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” Summary & Analysis**  |

In the days of King Arthur, Britain was filled with fairies and elves, unlike now, when lecherous friars roam around the land. Although the friars rape women, just as incubi used to do in the days of fairies, women only lose their dishonor: the friars don’t make them pregnant.

Even though the Wife of Bath sets her fable in the romantic realm of Arthurian legend, she takes the opportunity to retaliate against the Friar, who has just rudely interrupted her.



The [knight](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-knight-ea7bc132-e142-4ca3-826b-89e71d99fe78) sets forth sorrowfully through the countryside and asks the question of every woman he meets. Everyone answers differently. Some say riches; some say honor; some, jolliness; lust; clothes; etc. Some say that women want to be free. Some say that women’s greatest desire is to be able to deceive and keep secrets. As proof of this last point, the [Wife of Bath](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-wife-of-bath) tells Ovid’s story of King Midas, whose ears were turned into ass’s ears. Midas begged his wife not to tell, but the secret burned inside her so much that she couldn’t bear it and she whispered it to the marsh water.

Though the knight seeks his answer far and wide, women don't come to consensus. The only shortcoming that women have according to the Wife of Bath––that is, their inability to keep secrets––is the only thing that can save the young knight. Although the Wife of Bath primarily relies on her own experience to give her authority, she can also use literary examples like the story of King Midas to back up her claims.

The [knight](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-knight-ea7bc132-e142-4ca3-826b-89e71d99fe78) and the [old woman](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-old-woman) go to court, where a large audience of the [queen](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-queen) and her maids is assembled, waiting to hear the knight’s answer. He tells them that women desire sovereignty over their husbands and lovers. The women in the audience agree that this is the right answer, and his life is spared.

The women gathered in assembly to hear the knight are reminiscent of the townspeople who gather in the Knight’s Tale to watch Palamon and Arcite duel. Though no women agreed throughout the knight’s yearlong journey, all the woman concede that he now has the right answer.

At that moment, the [old woman](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-old-woman) comes forward and demands that the [knight](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-knight-ea7bc132-e142-4ca3-826b-89e71d99fe78) marry her. The knight recoils in horror, begging her to take his possessions instead of his body, but the old woman insists, and he is forced to wed and bed her, and the knight is miserable the whole time.

Even though the knight begs to get out of his contract to marry the ugly old woman, everybody involved or witnessing––the old hag, the queen, even the knight himself––know that the knight is bound by his promise.

While they are in bed, the [old woman](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-old-woman) asks the [knight](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-knight-ea7bc132-e142-4ca3-826b-89e71d99fe78) why he is so despondent, and the knight replies that he is repulsed by her “loothly” and “oold” appearance. The old woman reminds him that true gentleness and character are on the inside, not the outside. Sons of noble blood may be villainous; true poverty, she says, is in greed and longing for what you do not have.

The old woman is not ashamed of her ugliness, nor is she angry at the knight’s superficiality. She takes it for granted that he would be unhappy with an ugly woman, but reminds him that beauty is on the inside.

The [old woman](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-old-woman) gives the [knight](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-knight-ea7bc132-e142-4ca3-826b-89e71d99fe78) a choice. She can remain ugly but faithful and virtuous; or she can be beautiful, but he must take his chances that she may stray and cuckold him. The knight thinks for a while, then says that the choice is hers, thus granting her sovereignty.

It is unclear whether or not the knight genuinely, deep in his heart, wants to give the old woman the choice or whether he recognizes her question as a riddle and gives her the answer she wants to hear. Perhaps it doesn't matter, as he does give her the choice, which is what she wants. 

Since the [knight](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-knight-ea7bc132-e142-4ca3-826b-89e71d99fe78) gives her the authority to choose for herself, the [old woman](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-old-woman) says that she will be both beautiful and true. She tells him to kiss her, and when he does so, she transforms into a young woman, and they live happily ever after. The [Wife of Bath](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales/characters/the-wife-of-bath) concludes with a plea that Christ send all women meek, young, and fresh husbands who will not outlive their wives.

The Wife of Bath’s tale of the loathly lady who turns into a beautiful maid is a very common plot. However, the Wife of Bath’s twist is that at the end of the day, women must have sovereignty over their husbands, and that a woman's faithfulness in fact depends on being given freedom.



