

“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale: The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer.”  
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# The Wife of Bath's Prologue

## The Wife of Bath's Prologue

The Wife of Bath begins her tale with a prologue that lasts longer than the story itself. She talks proudly and openly about her multiple experiences with marriage, namely five. She overtly ignores any Christian principles when discussing her five marriages and returns to the Christian principle of being fruitful and multiplying, as something that she adheres to dearly. She uses many supposed lines from the Bible to support her personal actions, proving them lawful.

She mentions that she will welcome a sixth husband when ready and points out that King Solomon had multiple wives. She also mentions that Jesus never explicitly stated any laws about virginity, and goes on to mention that people have body parts for sex and should use them accordingly. "I pray you, telleth me, / Or where comanded he virginitee?" Wife of Bath's Prologue, l.61-62.

### Topic Tracking: Sexuality 4

The Pardoner immediately interjects negatively on the Wife of Bath's actions, to which she responds with descriptions of each of her husbands. Three of them were good men, while two of them were young (and implicitly not good). The three benevolent husbands were rich, old, and kind, and the Wife of Bath knew how to manipulate them by withholding sex until she got what she wanted. However, her fourth husband was young and had a mistress with the marriage. The two had met their matches in one another, as they shared many of the same qualities, until he unfortunately dies. The fifth husband, Jankin, however, was a cruel man, for he was violent in his actions. He was an Oxford student who was living with one of the Wife of Bath's friends while she was still married to her fourth husband, and when he died, the two were married: Jankin, age twenty and the Wife of Bath, twice his years. She gave him all of her property and he still never let her have her way with any actions or disputes, and one time he struck her so hard on the ear that she lost hearing forever from that side. He cited Roman history as proof that a wife should be submissive, yet the Wife of Bath could not be submissive in a way that he liked.

### Topic Tracking: Violence 9

The Wife of Bath then cites stories from the Bible that denigrate women. She illustrated how women in books are written by monks who have no personal contact with women. She claims that these stories would be different if women wrote them. After her violent attack by Jankin, he became so penitent that he gave up his authority in their marriage. From then on, they were kind to one another, for both parties got what they wanted. Having detailed her personal life, the Wife of Bath is now ready to tell her tale.

# The Wife of Bath's Tale

## The Wife of Bath's Tale

The Wife of Bath returns to the Arthurian times of fairy queens and elves to tell her story. One day, one of King Arthur's knights found a maiden walking alone, and raped her. The crime of rape usually was awarded death; however, the queen begged to save the knights life. She told the knight that she could save his life if he could answer the one question: What do women desire? "I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me / What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren. / Be war and keep thy nekke-boon from iren," Wife of Bath's Tale, 148-50.

### Topic Tracking: Violence 10

The queen gave the knight one year to find the answer to her question before he lost his life. The knight began his journey to discover what women desire, but could find no satisfactory answers or responses. He was told wealth, status, sexual performance, happiness, and other such answers, but never found one solitary answer. After the full year almost passed, he knew that he must accept his death and return to the Queen. Before he gave up, he met an old woman who agreed to tell him the answer if he would marry her. She said that women desire control and sovereignty over their husbands. The knight returned to the queen and gave that answer, which turned out to be the correct response. The knight, now forced and bound to marry the old lady, became miserable and wished for death instead, for he knew he must now marry her. The two begin to quarrel and put each other down, for he believed her not only to be ugly, but of low-birth, and she called him a snob and un-gentlemanlike. The old woman decided to give the knight a choice.

He can marry her, an ugly old woman who is kind and devoted, or have a young, beautiful maiden with independence. He chooses to free the old woman and proceeds to kiss her old body. When they kiss, the old woman transforms into a beautiful young lady. The two live happily ever after and they were devoted to one another. The Wife of Bath concludes her tale with a moral that allows Christ to grant all women submissive husbands who will always satisfy them sexually in bed.

### Topic Tracking: Loyalty 7

### Topic Tracking: Sexuality 5