

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer)

Setting:

legendary kingdom of King Arthur, sixth century C.E., regulated socially by chivalry

Summary:

One day a knight of King Arthur's court attacks a young maiden, raping her violently. By law he should be beheaded, but Arthur allows his wife, Queen Guinevere, to make the final decision. The queen says that she will let the knight live if he can answer one question: What is the thing that women most desire? He has one year and a day to complete his quest and find the answer.

After searching unsuccessfully for a year, the knight meets an old woman. She has the answer to the question, and she vows to save his life if the knight will promise to do whatever she asks. He does, and the two journey to the king's court where the knight delivers the correct answer to the members of the court of King Arthur. In the presence of the king, queen, and nobility, the old lady makes her demand on the knight—he must marry her. He does so unwillingly and complains that he can never love her because she is old, ugly, poor, and common (not of noble birth).

In a long speech, she explains that nobility is a matter of behavior, not of social rank. Her age and ugliness, she says, will prevent her from being unfaithful to her husband. She then gives him two choices: she can remain old, ugly, and faithful, OR she can become young, pretty, and faithless. The knight tells her that he will do what she wants. At that, she turns into a beautiful, young, and loyal woman. They live happily ever after.

Narrator:

Every narrator, the character who tells a story, has a distinct voice revealed through choice of subject matter, tone, and language. Do not confuse author and narrator. Geoffrey Chaucer is the author of "The Wife of Bath's Tale;" a woman from the town of Bath, England, who has been married five times, is the narrator. The wife of Bath is an opinionated woman with very definite ideas about women, men, marriage, and social class. In narrating her tale, the wife reveals much about herself especially as she increasingly identifies herself with the old woman in her story.