

The Wife of Bath's Tale Summary

Writer: Geoffrey Chaucer | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The Wife of Bath

Before sharing her story, the Wife of Bath talks about her personal life. She has been married five times and defends her choices by saying God wanted humans to multiply and even King Solomon had many wives. She rejects the idea that virginity is superior. She argues that if no women had children, there would be no virgins. She believes God gave her gifts, like her sexuality, to use, and since she wasn't gifted with nunhood, she uses her "gifts" to maintain power over her husbands.

At this point, the Pardoner interrupts. The Pardoner is worried that his future wife might control him the way the Wife of Bath controlled her husbands. She tells him to wait and hear her story before deciding.

The Wife describes her marriages: three were "good" husbands—rich, old, and easy to control. She manipulated them with false accusations and by withholding intimacy. Her fourth husband, however, was unfaithful and had a mistress. So, she tried to make him jealous. Her fifth husband was much younger, only 20, while she was 40. Despite the age difference, she fell in love with him at her fourth husband's funeral. Their marriage was tumultuous and included arguments and even a physical fight.

The Friar complains she is taking too long to get to her tale, so she finally begins.

The Tale

In King Arthur's court, a young knight commits a terrible crime by raping a young woman. He is sentenced to death, but Queen Guinevere asks for a chance to give him a second chance. She and the court decide that if the knight can discover what women truly want within a year, he will be spared.

The knight travels for a year, asking women what they desire most, but he receives many different answers. Near the deadline, he encounters a group of women in a forest. As he approaches, all but one—a poor, ugly crone (an ugly old woman)—disappear. The crone

promises to give him the answer if he agrees to grant her one request. Desperate, he agrees.

At court, the knight reveals the crone's answer: women want power and control over their husbands and lovers. This answer is correct. This answer saves the knight's life. However, the crone demands her reward: marriage to the knight. Though reluctant, the knight agrees to marry her because he owes her his life.

On their wedding night, the knight is unhappy and tells his new wife that he is ashamed of her appearance. She offers him a choice: she can remain ugly but be loyal and good, or she can become young and beautiful but possibly unfaithful. The knight wisely tells her to choose what she thinks is best. By giving her the power, he gives her what women want most—control. The crone rewards him by becoming both beautiful and faithful. They live happily ever after.

At the end of the tale, the Wife of Bath prays for husbands who are young, obedient, and good in bed.