

## **The wife of bath – TEXT ANALYSIS**

In The Canterbury Tales, the Wife's contribution is unique because her prologue is more than twice as long as her tale (828 lines to 307) and her discussion of marriage can be divided into three major components; from line 1 to 161 (here she sets out her theoretical arguments about marriage), from line 194 to 828 (she relates her own practical experience of marriage) and lines 851-1264 (she gives an exemplum in the form of a tale).

Her prologue and tale form a part of the marriage group of tales

### **THE PROLOGUE**

#### LINES 1-3

- The wife sets out her views on the purpose and nature of marriage, particularly the issue of multiple marriages.
- She claims that she does not need authorities (e.g. bible) to back her up as her own experience is sufficient enough to justify her speaking about the woes of marriage.
- She says she was first married at 12 and that fact that she got married inside the church (and not like the poorer people who got married at "chirche door") shows her wealth.
- Her use of the word 'experience' is a direct challenge to the traditional and male-dominated authority of the Medieval Church.

#### LINES 4-61

- ✘ She uses biblical examples to defend her right to marry more than once. It is ironic that she began stating she does not need 'authoritees' and then goes on to use them at length.
- ✘ The medieval Catholic Church taught that virginity was the most blessed state. Monogamous marriage was also good (as Jesus only attended one marriage), but widows were discouraging from re-marrying.
- ✘ This is why the wife feels her five marriages need some justification. She is now already on the lookout for husband number 6.
- ✘ She questions the belief that a woman should only marry once, asking where it is supported in the bible. The wife speaks of the passage in St. John's gospel of the story of the Samaritan, but again here she seems to have interpreted it wrong.
- ✘ Contrary to what she said earlier, she is now using biblical examples to defend her right to marry more than once.
- ✘ Chaucer's contemporary audience would recognise the biblical references and when she speaks of Lord Solomon (who was believed to have had 1000 wives) she says she would then like at least half as much as him (i.e. 500). We pick up her sexual tendencies and obsessions. However again she seem to be interpreting the bible in the way she wants as in reality Solomon was brought further away and punished by God for this behaviour.
- ✘ She also states that St. Paul recommends chastity but accepts that it is better to marry than to burn with passion. However, how does this Wife know this? In Chaucer's time there was an unofficial English version of the Bible but reading it was against the law. Perhaps she had heart St Paul's letters read in church or perhaps she had paid close attention to what Jankin had said to her.
- ✘ She sites Abraham and Jacob, who also had more than one wife and argues that if there was no procreation there would be no virgins. God told her to go forth and multiply (ironically,

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she has no children) and states that the bible did not state mention any specific number of husbands.

#### LINES 62-114

- The Wife explains that although virginity is the ideal, it is not suited to her and therefore she will always choose to marry.
- Sometimes she speaks of bigamy and sometimes as serial monogamous marriages to defend her case. This inconsistency further highlights the idea that there is a gap in the Wife's knowledge and understanding. She is clearly showing some of Chaucer's own knowledge because as a Wife of her status would not have had all the knowledge she had.
- She continues to use the Bible for her defence, stating that although St. Paul recommended virginity, he did not insist on it, it is only his advice and he does not claim that God had told him so. She says advice is not an order.
- She explains that she is not such a perfect person as if God commanded virginity then he could have condemned marriage and then the human race would not have been propagated (ironically, again her concern is not the propagation of the human race but it is otherwise as she has no children).
- Her argument seems superficially reasonable. She and the bible agree that not every household utensil is of gold. But she uses this as an argument for saying that wooden vessels are equally useful and therefore equally worthy. There is an apparent humility in her acceptance that she is not gold, however the bible passage clearly has a different message; it says that wooden vessels are ennobled and that every person should attempt to purify themselves so that they are noble. Metaphorically every person could and should become a golden vessel fit for the Lord's service. In fact the bible specifically states that people should shun youthful passions, however these are what the Wife claims are her special gifts. Once again her interpretation is completely at odds with the biblical original.
- She argues that Christ (who was perfect) did not instruct everyone to sell everything and give it to the poor, he only spoke to those who wanted to be perfect and she admits she is not perfect.

#### LINES 115-162

- She argues that sexual organs are there for use and so she will use hers. She is on dangerous ground – the medieval Church condemned sexual intercourse for pleasure.
- She points out that she is not advocating that everyone should feel obliged to indulge in the delights of marriage.
- She refers to Corinthians which states that the husband and wife are both indebted to each other. A similar point is also made in the parson's tale – he affirms that marriage is yielding your body to your partner. However the wife does not recognise a mutual obligation upon both partners.
- She calls the male sexual organ "his sely instrument" – sely can mean either simple or happy or blessed. It also has the further meaning of morally good or innocence. We could interpret the use of that adjective as the Wife rejecting the notion that the sexual parts of the body are corrupting and shameful.
- She says that respect should be given to chastity and she doesn't plan on speaking ill of virginity. She says virginity and marriage are both equally valid and different.

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- She claims that she will dominate her husband. She ignores the reciprocal nature of the marriage bond and argues that her husband owes her a debt and so they shall have sex whenever she wants it.

LINES 163-193

- The Pardoner interrupts her, claiming that he was about to get married but she has put him off the idea. The audience may have found this funny and amusing because in the general prologue Chaucer presented the pardoner as potentially being homosexual who is trying to create a false persona of having many wives, so it's comical that he now says he does not want to marry his wife.
- She rapidly puts him in his place and continues, telling him to wait as her tale has not yet started. She says not to judge her or be offended by what she says as she just wants to make entertainment.
- There is dramatic irony here by seeing the Pardoner (a gifted and fluent speaker) being silenced so quickly by a woman. He then encourages the Wife to continue.
- The interruption also has a structural purpose in marking the transition from the Wife's theoretical introduction about marriage to her relation of practical experience with her husbands.

LINES 194-451

- The Wife declares that three of her husbands "were goode" and the second two were "badde".
- The first three 'good' ones are lumped and dealt with together.
- She states they are 'goode' because they are 'riche, and olde'. Their age and feebleness enables the Wife to dominate them. There is also the added advantage that they will soon die so she'll be able to move on to another (rich) man. She clearly married for material gain. They were fully besotted with her and she feels she has no obligation to be nice to them as she cannot gain any more from them.
- She says she would grind them down but she didn't care and didn't give them respect – she is coming across as cold and unfeeling. However we can say that she is an honest person.
- She speaks of the Dunmow Flich in Essex – a side of bacon was annually awarded to the married couple who had not quarrelled or wished themselves single in the last year. The award of bacon would have been precious as food was rather scarce at the time (the contemporary audience would have been familiar with this contextual reference)
- She lists misogynistic views and how men place such restraints on women, especially on their looks or superficial behaviour and then condemned for things beyond their control. The misogynistic views is from Theophrastus.
- She says she refused these husbands in bed until they had given her whatever it was she wanted (perhaps the only way she can gain independence is through her sexuality and through selling her body). The fact that she is proud of her behaviour perhaps shows that Chaucer wanted to criticise the wife and not praise her. However, her behaviour cannot be fully condemned because perhaps this was the only way available to her to gain independence (she can only really gain money and wealth through marriage). We must also remember that the only other females in the Canterbury Tales was a Prioress and a Nun and

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neither of them would get married and so this shows that Chaucer was aiming these stories at a much wider audience of women and men.

- She then also makes a reference to a Folk tale of 'the tell-tale bird' (here a wife entertains a lover in front of a bird who informs her husband but the wife tells the husband that the bird is mad. The wife and her husband pretend there is a storm and the next day the bird talks about being kept up by bad weather and the husband is convinced that the bird is mad.) In the tale the woman is portrayed as scheming and of being immoral and yet the wife argues that wives should learn from this story.
- Lines 235-378 are in the form of reported direct speech as she recounts the way that she addressed her first husbands. She is at her most lively when she is mocking her husbands and twisting their arguments in her favour.
- She lists all the things she accused her old husbands of unfairly charging her with, such as not being happy unless her beauty is constantly praised. This is done to slowly build up a case so she can now accuse them of being suspicious that she is attracted to Jankin. However, Jankin becomes her fifth husband so their fears and their character analyses of them could seem to have some truth.
- She *seems* to be half justifying her suspected adultery by arguing that the wisest man is the contented one who does not care how much another man's wealth exceeds his. She says that as long as you have enough or all that you want you should not care what other people have. She states that her husband should not stop her from having sex with other people as long as she has sex with him as well. However, her argument does not hold any moral ground.
- She then refers to St. Timothy saying that he felt that women should not braid their hair and remind chaste but she says she does not care about this passage – when something does not agree with her own point of view she refuses to accept it.
- She describes how she achieved dominance over them, by telling them things they said when they were drunk (such as comparing a woman's love to hell and that a wife destroys a husband like an insect destroys a tree). She has made this all up though in order to put them in the wrong and make them feel guilty so they give her whatever she wants.
- She believes attack is the best form of defence; she says that if they accused her, even if she was guilty, she would turn the tables around and accuse them of something
- However, she never loses sight of her overall purpose and constantly refers to the battle of "maistry" (control) and she is of the opinion that men should submit to women's will (and she would continue and not give in until they had backed down).
- She goes on to state women's best qualities; deceit, weeping and spinning.
- Chaucer could perhaps be trying to create a comic passage and one that the female audience might agree with. The opposite reaction might be that the audience would be shocked or appalled by her overwhelming personality.

LINES 452-502

- She describes her fourth, and one of the 'badde', husbands.
- He is 'badde' because he is not under her control and enjoyed himself with other women.
- She responds to this by making him jealous – not through adultery but by flirting with other men. She says she made his life purgatory (the place between heaven and hell – hinting that she made his life hell). She made sure he suffered for cheating. One medieval anti-feminist writer made God defend the institution of matrimony as a form of purgatory on earth by which the sinful could be saved from damnation.
- The Wife is careful to avoid the condemnation that she is adulterous and therefore in the wrong. She is quick to highlight that she was only flirting as if she had admitted to

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committing adultery then she loses the moral high ground as she cannot condemn her husband for committing adultery if she has cheated too.

- She justifies her treatment of him saying he was a 'revelour' (someone who likes to party) and she had no sorrow at his death. This may reflect the fact that most marriages in this era were formed for economic rather than romantic reasons.
- She gets side-tracked and begins talking about herself. She references to the story of Metellius – in the story Metellius beat his wife to death with a stick for drinking wine. The wife argues now that if her husbands wanted to stop her drinking wine they would not be able to.
- The Wife says wine makes her sing and makes her think of Venus (the Goddess of love). She refers to a popular well-known proverb at the time to argue that wine makes women defenceless against seduction.
- Perhaps she is contradicting herself by stating that she enjoys the very things (such as drinking) that she condemned her first three husbands for.
- She says age has taken away her beauty and her vitality

LINES 503-626

- ❖ She speaks of her fifth husband, Jankin. Who she says was the most unkind of all her husbands and he used to beat her, yet she loved him the most, perhaps because he was difficult to please (we all want what we can't have) and he was good in bed.
- ❖ He was an oxford student although at this point he has left university (probably because he could not afford to stay on) and is lodging with one of the Wife's friends, Alisoun (the same name as the wife's). The Wife was rather close to Alisoun too and says she shared her husband's secrets with her, her husband hated this. She enjoyed going out to town with Alisoun and they often went to the church (in Medieval times the Church was often where the social gatherings were).
- ❖ We learn that Jankin is also young (he's 20 – the Wife is 40!) and she is captivated by his youth and physical charms. The disparity in ages has been reversed; he is the young poor man marrying the 'old' and rich woman (in effect he does to her what she has done to her other husband). This role reversal builds up thematic tension.
- ❖ The difference between him and her previous husbands is that she marries him 'for love and no riches'.
- ❖ She says "that al myn herte I yaf unto his hold" (she gave him all her heart to hold) – this gives a glimpse at a softer side of her. It is only in this fifth marriage that she is emotionally invested.
- ❖ She flirts with him and agrees to marry him even while her fourth husband is still alive. She says she will wed him when she is widowed from her fourth husband.
- ❖ Again, she tries to avoid direct charges of adultery by claiming that she is just securing her next husband but has not actually cheated. (this would act as a warning bell for those on the pilgrimage as it seems she is probably on the look out for husband number 6). From a feminist perspective, she is ensuring she will always be provided for in; in the society at a time a single woman was not given much respect so having a husband would have given her status. She even says her mother taught her to flirt and to make her husband feel guilty, is Chaucer presenting all women as being manipulative and deceitful? This dream links to the White Devil as in the other text a dream is used to set a motion in action.
- ❖ Her fourth husband dies and she says she wept "as wyves mooten" suggesting she was again just putting on an act. However, after the funeral she wasn't too sad since her fourth husband cheated on her and she already had her plans with Jankin anyways. Even in the

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funeral she is swooning over Jankin's looks – this provides for a comic moment for the audience but it is also quite shocking given the context of where the Wife is telling this story.

- ❖ She briefly interrupts her story with an account of her horoscope which she says exemplifies her lusty and volatile nature. She says she is “faire, and riche, and yong” – it seems she is trying to sell herself. She is Venus in her senses but her heart is dominated by Mars – her character is shaped by two entirely different and incompatible impulses; Venus is linked with pleasure and loving and Mars is boldly domineering and aggressive.
- ❖ She argues that it doesn't matter if a person was poor as long as he pleased her in bed; we hardly believe her as before Jankin all her marriages were based on rich men.

LINES 627-828

- ✚ She describes the relationship between her and Jankin and explains that, within a month of her fourth husband's death, she had married him. In this last section we again see the theme of maistrie – which partner will have dominance in marriage
- ✚ She loves Jankin, which immediately gives him the advantage that her other husbands didn't have – she gives up control totally to him (she signs over to him all her land and possessions – even though she instantly regretted it after because he wouldn't give her anything she desired) – there are clear differences between this marriage and the previous; she actually loves this one, he is the dominant one, he is poor, he is younger. She now finds herself in the positions that her previous husbands were – this begs the questions; is he marrying her for money and sex or does he actually love her?
- ✚ However, he turns out to be rather anti-feminist and Jankin cites anti-feminist material from tales of Roman history against her. The theme of the book is the moral weakness and dangerous attraction of women which makes females a snare for men. Perhaps Eve's failings in Adam and Eve could be the root cause for anti-feminist writings as women are seen as temptresses. However, because the bible and any scholarly books have all been interpreted by men and so it is a prejudiced interpretation.
- ✚ The book contains examples of women's failings (such as saying the fall of mankind is all the fault of women or a tale which tells how a man left his wife because she stood in the doorway of her house without covering her hair – here he is saying certain standards of women are expected and they are required to comply. He also gives another example of a roman who shunned his wife as she had gone to a summer fair without telling him – summer festivals were known to encourage wild behaviour and were even forbidden in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; a Chaucerian audience may have understood why the husband was so annoyed). The wife says, however, that she did not care about his stories and she would do what she wanted anyways and wouldn't let him scold her.
- ✚ She says she will now tell everyone what happened with his book– she says she will speak to 'thee' – this is the informal for 'you' which gives the sensation that she is bringing the audience closer to her.
- ✚ Jankin's book tells of Adam and Eve by saying that Eve transgressed and so is responsible for the downfall of mankind. It also speaks of Sampson and Delilah – the wife was seen as responsible for Sampson losing his strength as she cut off his hair. Another story is of Hercules and Dianara – she gave him a shirt of Nessus as a means of renewing his love her for, she was unaware that it was poisoned, Hercules then put it on and it was so painful that he allowed his body to be consumed by fire. The running theme in all these stories is anti-feminism and misogyny and it is not only Jankin's feeling but it is representative of the beliefs of ancient Medieval history. Women couldn't publish books and so only the male story was told and that becomes the perceived truth.

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- ✚ The Wife is pushed beyond endurance and loses her temper, rips three leaves from the book. The tearing is quite symbolic of not accepting male authority. She also hits him on the cheek so hard that he falls backwards into the fire.
- ✚ He gets up and hits her (which caused her to become deaf in one ear) but this mistake shifts the balance of power in her favour. She lies still and he thinks he has killed her – she wants to shift the balance in the relationship. She clearly forgets that it was she who struck the first blow.
- ✚ Jankin regrets hitting her immediately and asks for forgiveness by saying he would never had done so unprovoked. She asks for one last kiss, he bends to give her one and she hits him again and refuses to speak to him.
- ✚ We may see the Wife's anger due to the prolonged bullying of her by her husband or we may see her as embodying exactly the kind of vices that Jankin complains about, thereby justifying her feminist views.
- ✚ When Jankin asks for forgiveness - She grants it once he gives her total control.
- ✚ They are happily afterwards and she makes him burn his book. Again here she displays the thematic assertion that it is better for women to be in control and it can be seen as an attempt to destroy the patriarchal hold men have over women.
- ✚ He tells her she can do whatever she wants as long as she has mutual respect in the relationship and does not embarrass him. This is very similar to the terms accepted by the knight at the end of the Wife's tale

LINES 829-856

- ✚ To mark the transition into the tale and in an echo of the Pardoner's earlier interruption, the Friar is so amazed by the Wife's excessive talking that he laughs at her assertion that she is just about to begin her tale now.
- ✚ His laughing appreciation of the Wife's long preamble is typical of his relaxed and indulgent manner towards the rich. However, the Wife is not taken in by his charming manner and she snubs him.
- ✚ An argument develops between him and the Summoner. Their argument lays the ground for further tales by exploiting this conflict between them. The Friar later tells a story of a wicked Summoner who is carried off by the devil after trying to cheat an old woman. The Summoner then later tells the story of a greedy Friar.
- ✚ The Host puts an end to the argument and asks the Wife to tell her tale.
- ✚ The tale will only be half as long as its prologue. Chaucer clearly intends us to view the prologue as a major component of his portrayal of the Wife and her views.

## THE TALE

LINES 857-881

- The tale is set in the legendary time of King Arthur, when the country was 'fulfilled of faerie'
- The Wife contrasts this era with her own modern time, when according to her friars and other holy men have driven all the fairies away.
- It begins in the formal 'once upon a time' style.
- However, the Wife changes the tone and mood by introducing 'modern' friars, whose Christianity she says has driven the fairies and magic out. With the onset of Christianity all pagan mystically was eradicated as the fairies have been supplanted by "lymytuors" who would roam around praying and begging.

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- The mood is furthered soured when she snidely accuses the friars of being incubi (a male daemon expected to have sexual intercourse with a sleeping woman and so were often blamed for unwanted pregnancies) and malignant spirits. She says the Friars will seduce and dishonour women and insults their reputation for dubious morals.
- The Wife's purpose here is to discredit men in general, so that the crime that follows seems a common aspect of their behaviour.

LINES 882-888

- The Wife describes the way that one of King Arthur's knights rapes a young maiden.
- What makes the crime awful is that it is committed by one of King Arthur's knights. She is placing the male protagonist in the worst possible moral position.
- This could be used to reinforce the impression she gives of what can be expected from male behaviour.
- The Knight is never named, as if to imply that he represents all men.
- Chaucer writes - 'By verray force he rafte hir maydenheed'. Not only does this show that the Knight believes that he can sexually abuse the maiden without fear of recompense, but Chaucer's use of the word 'rafte' is derived from the word 'reeve'. This particular phrase meant 'to plunder' or 'to spoil' property which shows how the Knight views this maiden as a piece of his property.

LINES 889-918

- 👤 The knight is condemned to death, but the queen intervenes and the king puts the knight at her disposal and she redeems him by setting the challenge that he is to discover 'what thing is it that wommen moost desiren'. His fate and his life leads him to be at the mercy of women.
- 👤 He is given a year and a day (a traditional fairy tale term) to find the answer and if he does he will keep his life. This quest for a question is a typical medieval theme and so would have been recognised by the audience.
- 👤 The Wife is continuing her theme; normally it would have been the king who would pass judgement, but King Arthur submits to his wife's will.
- 👤 Once the knight has committed the crime of rape he is permanently subject to the will of women; the Queen, her ladies and the hag.
- 👤 It is not until he submits absolutely to be ruled by a woman (as Jankin does) that he can be redeemed and lead a happy life; this of course is in-keeping with the Wife's theme of maistrie.

LINES 919-988

- 👤 The knight travels through the land on his quest but he cannot find 2 people who can agree on the same answer.
- 👤 In keeping with much of the tale, Chaucer mixes the apparently conventional material with the personal approach of the Wife of Bath. Instead of just listing the possible answers to the question, the Wife contributes her own opinion saying a man will win our attention with flattery, attention, care and allowing us to do what we please without chastising us of bad behaviour. She says we wish to be clean of sin – this clearly emphasises the idea of appearing and being; women are not actually clean of sin, as seen through the Wife's behaviour herself, but they like to present themselves as being pure. What effect does Chaucer achieve by allowing the Wife's personal voice to break through? Does it lessen the

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impact of the story or does it contribute further to our understanding to the Wife and her attitudes?

- 👄 But the wife goes on to argue that women can conceal nothing. She uses the story of Midas as proof that they cannot conceal nothing – Midas was a Greek King and under his long hair he had two donkey's ears (donkeys are portrayed as being stupid). Midas was ashamed of his ears and the only person who knew about them were his wife and he swore her to secrecy and she promised she would tell no one... but she found it impossible to keep the secret so she ran to the marsh and put her mouth to the water and shared the secret, she felt no longer burdened. The Wife seems to be portraying women as untrustworthy and in a negative light.
- 👄 He turns sorrowfully towards home at the end of his year away.
- 👄 The search for the answer to a challenge is a traditional medieval and fairy-tale quest theme.

LINES 989-1013

- The knight enters the forest (significant as the forest is the traditional setting for magical encounters in traditional fairy tales) and encounters a group of 24 dancing ladies (presumably fairies) who then mysteriously disappear and are replaced by a foul-looking old lady.
- He speaks to her politely – a significant contrast to how he treated the maiden earlier.
- She makes him promise to do the next thing she asks, and the knight agrees. The Wife puts this woman in complete command of the knight's fate. Note how he promises without even querying how the hag can know the right answer – the Wife did this to emphasise his submission. The woman/hag here is shown as being in complete control (maistrie), thus in-keeping with the theme of the prologue
- The knight has to agree as if not he will have no answer and will die.

LINES 1014-1045

- 👄 The Hag whispers the answer to the knight and they set off back to Arthur's court.
- 👄 The knight reveals the answer to be that women desire "sovereinetee" and "maistrie" over men. The word "maistrie" was used by the Wife at the end of her prologue and will be used again at the end of the tale.
- 👄 In essence, the Hags answer states that women desire dominance over both their husbands and their lovers. (the Hag appears to be a mouthpiece for the views of the Wife herself – however they cannot be fully joined as similar characters due to the speech the hag gives on "gentilesee")
- 👄 Not a single woman in the court disagrees, and the knight is granted his life. (again like a traditional fairy-tale, he is saved from certain death at the last minute)

LINES 1046-1103

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- ✿ The Hag immediately demands that the knight keeps his promise and fulfils her next request.
- ✿ She insists they get married.
- ✿ The knight is horrified, he would rather do anything other than marry her. However he agrees. Nevertheless he is still quite rude to her, this shows he was only polite to her earlier to get what he wanted of her. This rudeness places him as a further moral disadvantage.
- ✿ On their wedding night he is in torment, while she is happy. She queries his lack of passion and he condemns her for being loathsome, old and of low birth – not a noblewoman. By calling her of low birth, the Wife allows the knight to be further seen in the wrong and being disrespectful (she has saved his life and he behaves poorly in return)
- ✿ Here the more formal fairy-telling mode is replaced by a kind of realistic comic dialogue. The Wife adds to the comedy by emphasising the joylessness of the ceremony.
- ✿ The hag's sarcastic surprise at his behaviour when they go to bed shows the obvious irony that he raped a young woman without a thought but now is unwilling to have sex with his legitimate wife.
- ✿ The wife offers to "amende al this" but it is an offer the knight cannot understand because he is unaware that she is supernatural.

## LINES 1104-1218

- The Wife delays the denouement (ending) by introducing a formal digression (diversion off topic) on the nature of "gentillesse". The term "gentillesse" most naturally translates as "gentility" – the polite manners expected of a person of noble or 'gentle birth'. This all leaves the audience, and the knight, in suspense.
- In this way, the lady can further assert her power over the knight because she withholds her decision to relieve his anguish until she has delivered her digression.
- The knight calls her ugly, old and low-born and this can provide a brief comic effect but the Wife of Bath purposely makes him outspoken in order to add discourtesy to his previous crimes and to give the old woman the moral high ground; she has helped him and saved his life and he repays her by being ungrateful and discourteous, further disgracing his reputation.
- The lady chastises the knight for his discourteous manners. She picks up on his reference to her low birth. The woman states that truly noble behaviour is a gift from God, and not an accident of birth. She argues that true "gentillesse" has nothing to do with your class in society. She says "Christ wants us to claim our gentility from him and not from our ancestors' wealth" – we gain nobility from God and our own behaviour, not birth.
- This is a further condemnation of male behaviour; by outlining what genteel behaviour should be, she emphasises the way men fall short of such ideals (this links directly to the views and thoughts of the Wife of Bath herself)
- However, if genteel behaviour is not linked to birth, then the Wife of Bath should be able to behave like that too, which she does not. This then could be seen as a condemnation of her, placed by Chaucer.
- It is often tempting to see the old woman as an extension of the Wife of Bath, however this speech on gentillesse limits this view. The tone and sentiments expressed are not the Wife's since it is preaching the qualities of humility and vitreous living, which is contrast to how the

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Wife acts. Moreover, the knowledge displayed is most definitely Chaucer's; the references to Dante, Boethius and Seneca show his learning rather than hers.

- There is a link to the Franklin's tale (in the Canterbury tales) as it also focuses on gentillesse and what is appropriate in marriage.
- The old woman claims that poverty is not linked with immorality and the more you have the more you have to lose – this clearly is not the view of the Wife of Bath herself. This idea of poverty can be linked to King Lear as it is only when he is stripped down on the heath that he realises what it is like to be an 'unaccommodated man'
- The knight also reproaches the woman for being old and ugly but she claims old should be held with respect and should allow her to be chaste to him and not stray.

LINES 1219-1264

- The lady gives the knight a cruel choice between having her ugly and faithful or beautiful and potentially unfaithful. Once again the power is in the woman's hand as she is the one providing the choices. Additionally, from a feminist perspective this can show how women are almost as ornaments and are judged on their looks and cannot be both beautiful and chaste.
- The knight grants her "maistrie", and only then is he rewarded by her transformation into a beautiful AND loyal wife.
- The ending reinforces the Wife's argument from the prologue – that women should have "maistrie". It is better for women to have control.
- This can be further noted by the close parallels and pairing quotations between the ending of the prologue and the tale.
- The audience is then intended to consider the prologue and tale as a single continuous piece of work and that the rambling words in the prologue were carefully crafted to lead up to the points made at the end.