

WIFE OF BATH CONTEXT

SOURCES:

- The 'Roman del la Rose' is a 13th century poem. One of its characters is a retired prostitute who talks about how to outwit men, similar to the Wife of Bath.
- The source of the tale was most likely to have been a folktale, one no longer known to us.
- The three most direct comparisons of the tale are
 - **'The Tale of Florent' by Chaucer's friend John Gower.** (a knight kills a man in self-defence and as punishment is set to find what all women desire or he'll be killed. He meets a woman who agrees to tell him if he marries her. He thinks she is old and will die soon so he agrees. Her answer is that women want to rule over men. He marries her in secret. On their wedding night he looks to find that she is beautiful and she says he can either have her beautiful and night or during the day. He cannot decide and lets her decide and as a result the spell that was cast on her by her stepmother is broken and she is beautiful all the time.)
 - **'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle'** (a knight meets King Arthur in a forest and challenges him to discover what women most desire. He is given a year to find out if not he'll be killed. Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew, travels with him to find the answer. Arthur, on his last attempt, encounters the ugly Dame Ragnelle who offers him the answer if Gawain will marry her. He agrees, and she says women desire 'sovereynthe'. This is the true answer. They get married and on their wedding night she is transformed into a beautiful lady but says she is under a spell and can only be beautiful wither by day or night. Gawain grants her 'sovereynthe' to decide which breaks the spell and she becomes permanently beautiful.)
 - The ballad **'The Marriage of Sir Gawain'** (similar to above.)
- Chaucer may have taken inspiration from Boccaccio's 'The Decameron', written in the same era, as much of its erotic and satirical portrayals of love is mirrored by the Wife

CONTEXT OF THE TIME OF THE WIFE OF BATH:

- In the fourteenth century, sex was considered a marital "dette" which the husband should pay to his wife.
- In the Middle Ages it was not a crime to hit a woman, rape a woman and sometimes, depending on the circumstances, it was condoned to kill a woman, especially if she had been unfaithful. A wife was a man's property to do with as they please. If a woman was unmarried she was the property of her father
- Chaucer was born around 1340 (the reign of Edward III)
- He lived through the Black Plague