

## **The Wife of Bath's Tale** **Summary and Discussion Questions**

### **Character Description:**

- Wealthy
- Kind of deaf
- Nicely-dressed (I.e., scarlet clothing, hose, etc.)
- Bold face – “handsome” – red-faced
- Married 5 times
- Been to Jerusalem three times – Rome – holy sites/shrines
- Large hips
- Gap-toothed
- Loved laughter and talk – loved to give advice about love & relationships
- The Wife of Bath has been on a pilgrimage 5 times (Jerusalem 3 times) and has been married 5 times. She considers herself to be important with regard to church. She cares more about being on a pilgrimage and about her social status than anything else. She rushes to the front of the church and is offended if anyone tries to get in front of her during a service.

### **Summary:**

In the Wife of Bath's tale, the Knight has raped a young maiden. His punishment for doing so is death; he is to have his head cut off. However, the King agrees to hand him over to the Queen. The Queen tells the Knight that he must come up with the answer to this question: What do women most desire? If he can come up with the correct answer, the Queen will spare his life. She gives him one year and one day to come up with the correct answer to the question.

In his quest to find the correct answer, the Knight travels all over. Finally, an Old Woman is able to provide the answer for him, and she will give him the answer on one condition, that he will do whatever she asks next of him. He agrees, and she tells him that what women want most is to be the same as a man, to have equal status as a man and not be beneath him. He tells the Queen, she agrees that answer is correct, and then the Old Woman reveals her condition. Her condition for giving him the answer is to agree to marry the Old Woman.

On the wedding night, the Knight was not interested in consummating the marriage. The Old Woman then calls into question the Knight's virtue and his behavior with regard to being a knight. He is not living up to the knight's code of chivalry or to his wealth and status. She offers him a new deal: the choice of loyalty and faithfulness from his wife OR the worry of unfaithfulness because of beauty. She said that as an old woman, she would always be faithful to him. If his bride were a young girl, he would have to worry about the young girl being unfaithful to him and have to worry about men trying to attract his wife. The Knight accepts the Old Woman's offer, and the Old Woman reveals that she is truly a young wife that any knight would be proud to have. The irony of this story is the fact that the Knight committed a crime against a woman where he had complete control over her, yet a woman has control over him in the end!

### **Other Things to Consider:**

- In the Wife of Bath's tale, the Wife of Bath says that women cannot keep a secret. She talks about how Midas' wife knows that Midas has donkey ears, and that she must tell someone. Midas' wife tells the river the truth about Midas' ears. In doing so, she proves the Wife of Bath's idea that women cannot keep secrets.
- The Feminist view that the Wife of Bath portrays offends and upsets some of the pilgrims, especially the male population. During this time, women's roles were that of inferior beings to their husbands, fathers, brothers, etc. To portray a story in which the female character has control over the Knight seemed absurd to the male travelers.

**Literary Focus:** Irony

**Irony** – a contrast or a discrepancy between expectations and reality – between what is said and what is meant, between what is expected and what happens, or between what appears to be true and what actually is true.

**Analysis:**

This narrative whose purpose is to promote the rights of women, as limited as they were, during medieval ages. The character presents truths and misconceptions about social inequality during this time period.

1. When is this tale set? (i.e., during the mythic reign of what king?)
2. According to the Wife of Bath, why can't people see elves any more? What has driven them out of their natural habitat?
3. What crime does the lusty bachelor commit? What is "maidenhead"? [*Hint:* This does not mean he decapitated the girl, as some students have mistakenly declared.]
4. What is the initial punishment King Arthur orders for the knight? Who intervenes and requests a special trial?
5. Who is in charge of this special trial for the rapist knight?
6. What must the knight do to save his head (i.e., what mission does the court give him)?
7. How long does the Knight have to fulfill this mission? What problem does the Knight find when he starts asking women what they want?
8. Which of the following items listed is **NOT** a response given by women when he asks them the question?
  - Riches,
  - Fame,
  - Prettiness,
  - Rich Array (fine clothes),
  - Lust Abed (pleasure in bed),
  - Widowhood,
  - Re-marriage,
  - Flattery,
  - Attentions (attentiveness),
  - Leisure from work,
  - Being free to do what they want,
  - Being held constant and trustworthy
9. What strange sight does the knight see while riding through the forest on his return journey?
10. What do the twenty-four women do or what happens to them as the knight approaches?
11. What are the Queen and the court's reaction to the knight's answer?
12. What are the wedding celebrations like when the knight marries the hag? (trick question!)
13. What does the hag teach the young knight about nobility in her lecture? What makes a person "noble" or "gentle" according to her?
14. What defense does the hag provide for her poverty and her ugliness? Why are these advantages, according to her?
15. How does the hag's appearance change at the end of the story?