The Wife of Bath's Tale
from The Canterbury Tales

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Benchmarks D.2.4.2, E.2.4.3
FCAT Benchmark E.2.4.1

Connect to Your Life

Love and Marriage You are probably familiar with the phrase "the battle of the sexes." This expression suggests that romantic relationships have an aspect of conflict, in which one party attempts to gain the upper hand. What are your own opinions on the subject? Would you say that a good marriage is basically an equal partnership, or do you think that one person needs to be the decision maker? Explain your opinions in a class discussion.

Build Background

Romance and Chivalry "The Wife of Bath's Tale" belongs to the so-called Marriage Group of *The Canterbury Tales,* in which different pilgrims offer stories that express their philosophies of love and marriage. Set in the days of Britain's legendary King Arthur, the story qualifies as a medieval **romance**—an adventure tale of knights and chivalry, in which the code of ideal knightly behavior (loyalty, faith, honor, and courtesy, especially to women) is stressed. In this story, however, a knight breaks the rules of chivalry and, as punishment, must undertake a quest.

WORDS TO KNOW
Vocabulary Preview

abominably
bequeath
concede
contemptuous
cosset
crone
dejected
ecstasy
implore
maim
prowess
rebuke
statute
temporal
tribulation

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS **NARRATOR** Whether a story is told in prose or verse, the **narrator** is the person or voice that tells the story. In *The Canterbury Tales,* the narrator of the "Prologue" introduces the characters who will serve as narrators of the tales that follow. Reread lines 455–486 of the "Prologue" (page 125), which introduce the Wife of Bath. Then try to predict the view of love and marriage that she might present in her tale.

ACTIVE READING **ANALYZING STRUCTURE** **Structure** is the way in which the parts of a literary work are put together. A **frame story** is a story that serves as a narrative setting or frame for one or more other stories. *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole has a frame structure, in which the story of the pilgrims serves as a frame within which the pilgrims tell their stories. The structure of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" features a main **plot** with several interruptions. For example, in the opening lines the Wife of Bath interrupts the main plot with a passage in which she criticizes friars. This particular interruption stems from the Wife's ongoing quarrel with the Friar as they travel to Canterbury.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read "The Wife of Bath's Tale," use a chart similar to the one shown to keep track of the interruptions to the main story.

Interruption	Reason
criticism of friars	Wife of Bath's quarrel with Friar in frame story

from The Wife of Bath's Prologue

The Wife of Bath

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon
"Madam," he said, "by God and by St. John,
That's noble preaching no one could surpass!
I was about to take a wife; alas!
Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?
There'll be no marrying for me this year!"

"You wait," she said, "my story's not begun.
You'll taste another brew before I've done;
You'll find it doesn't taste as good as ale;
And when I've finished telling you my tale
Of tribulation in the married life
In which I've been an expert as a wife,
That is to say, myself have been the whip.
So please yourself whether you want to sip
At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.
Be cautious before making the approach,
For I'll give instances, and more than ten.
And those who won't be warned by other men,
By other men shall suffer their correction,
So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.
You read his *Almagest;* you'll find it there."

"Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,"
The Pardoner said, "go on as you began!
Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.
Instruct us younger men in your technique."
"Gladly," she said, "if you will let me speak,
But still I hope the company won't reprove me
Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,
And please don't be offended at my views;
They're really only offered to amuse. . . ."

3 noble preaching: In the passage preceding this excerpt, the Wife of Bath has spoken at length about her view of marriage.

15 cask: barrel; **broach:** tap into.

20 Ptolemy (tŏl'ə-mē): a famous astronomer of the second century A.D. The *Almagest,* his most famous work, does not, however, contain the proverb cited in lines 18–19.

WORDS TO KNOW **tribulation** (trĭb'yə-lā'shən) *n.* suffering; great distress

The Wife of Bath's Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.
The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke
Their elfin dance on many a green mead,
Or so was the opinion once, I read,
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.
But no one now sees fairies any more.
For now the saintly charity and prayer
Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;
They search the countryside through field and stream
As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,
Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,
And that's the reason why there are no fairies.
Wherever there was wont to walk an elf
To-day there walks the holy friar himself
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,
Saying his matins and his holy things,
Walking his limit round from town to town.
Women can now go safely up and down
By every bush or under every tree;
There is no other incubus but he,
So there is really no one else to hurt you
And he will do no more than take your virtue.

Now it so happened, I began to say,
Long, long ago in good King Arthur's day,
There was a knight who was a lusty liver.
One day as he came riding from the river
He saw a maiden walking all forlorn
Ahead of him, alone as she was born.
And of that maiden, spite of all she said,
By very force he took her maidenhead.

This act of violence made such a stir,
So much petitioning to the king for her,
That he condemned the knight to lose his head
By course of law. He was as good as dead

35 mead: meadow.

42 motes: specks of dust.

43 bowers: bedrooms.

45 thorpes: villages; **outhouses:** sheds.

47 wherever . . . elf: wherever an elf was accustomed to walk.

51 limit: the area to which a friar was restricted in his begging for donations.

54 incubus (ĭn'kyə-bəs): an evil spirit believed to descend on women while they sleep.

39–56 What seems to be the Wife of Bath's attitude toward friars?

61 forlorn: sad and lonely.

63–64 of that maiden . . . maidenhead: in spite of the maiden's protests, he robbed her of her virtue.

(It seems that then the statutes took that view)
But that the queen, and other ladies too,
Implored the king to exercise his grace
So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case
And granted her his life, and she could choose
Whether to show him mercy or refuse.

The queen returned him thanks with all her might,
And then she sent a summons to the knight
At her convenience, and expressed her will:
"You stand, for such is the position still,
In no way certain of your life," said she,
"Yet you shall live if you can answer me:
What is the thing that women most desire?
Beware the axe and say as I require.

"If you can't answer on the moment, though,
I will concede you this: you are to go
A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn
Sufficient answer, then you shall return.
I shall take gages from you to extort
Surrender of your body to the court."

Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,
But there! All other choices were denied,
And in the end he chose to go away
And to return after a year and day
Armed with such answer as there might be sent
To him by God. He took his leave and went.

He knocked at every house, searched every place,
Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.
What could it be that women wanted most?
But all the same he never touched a coast,
Country or town in which there seemed to be
Any two people willing to agree.

Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,
"Honor," said some, some "Jollity and pleasure,"

71 grace: mercy; clemency.

65–74 What punishment do the king and the law demand? To whom does the king grant the final judgment?

87 gages: pledges.

WORDS TO KNOW
statute (stăch'o͞ot) *n.* a law
implore (ĭm-plôr') *v.* to plead; beg
concede (kən-sēd') *v.* to grant or acknowledge, often unwillingly

Some "Gorgeous clothes" and others "Fun in bed,"
"To be oft widowed and remarried," said
Others again, and some that what most mattered
Was that we should be cosseted and flattered.
That's very near the truth, it seems to me;
A man can win us best with flattery.
To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,
Ensnares us all, the best and worst of us.

Some say the things we most desire are these:
Freedom to do exactly as we please,
With no one to reprove our faults and lies,
Rather to have one call us good and wise.
Truly there's not a woman in ten score
Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,
But she will kick if what he says is true;
You try it out and you will find so too.
However vicious we may be within
We like to be thought wise and void of sin.
Others assert we women find it sweet
When we are thought dependable, discreet
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,
Never betraying things that we are told.
But that's not worth the handle of a rake;
Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!
Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?

Among some other little things, now stale,
Ovid relates that under his long hair
The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair
Of ass's ears; as subtly as he might,
He kept his foul deformity from sight;
Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.
He loved her best, and trusted in her too.
He begged her not to tell a living creature
That he possessed so horrible a feature.
And she—she swore, were all the world to win,
She would not do such villainy and sin
As saddle her husband with so foul a name;
Besides to speak would be to share the shame.
Nevertheless she thought she would have died
Keeping this secret bottled up inside;

115 ten score: 200.

117 but she will: who will not.

120 void of sin: sinless.

127 Midas: a legendary king of Phrygia in Asia Minor.

129 Ovid (ŏv'ĭd): an ancient Roman poet whose *Metamorphoses* is a storehouse of Greek and Roman legends. According to Ovid, it was a barber, not Midas's wife, who told the secret of his donkey's ears.

133 save: except.

WORDS TO KNOW

cosset (kŏs'ĭt) *v.* to treat like a pet; pamper

It seemed to swell her heart and she, no doubt,
Thought it was on the point of bursting out.

Fearing to speak of it to woman or man,
Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran
And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire
And, as a bittern bumbles in the mire,
She whispered to the water, near the ground,
"Betray me not, O water, with thy sound!
To thee alone I tell it: it appears
My husband has a pair of ass's ears!
Ah! My heart's well again, the secret's out!
I could no longer keep it, not a doubt."
And so you see, although we may hold fast
A little while, it must come out at last,
We can't keep secrets; as for Midas, well,
Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.

This knight that I am telling you about
Perceived at last he never would find out
What it could be that women loved the best.
Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast,
As home he went, he dared no longer stay;
His year was up and now it was the day.

As he rode home in a dejected mood
Suddenly, at the margin of a wood,
He saw a dance upon the leafy floor
Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.
Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn
Some words of wisdom ere he should return;
But lo! Before he came to where they were,
Dancers and dance all vanished into air!
There wasn't a living creature to be seen
Save one old woman crouched upon the green.
A fouler-looking creature I suppose
Could scarcely be imagined. She arose
And said, "Sir knight, there's no way on from here.
Tell me what you are looking for, my dear,
For peradventure that were best for you;
We old, old women know a thing or two."

147 sedge: marsh grasses.

148 bumbles in the mire: booms in the swamp. (The bittern, a wading bird, is famous for its loud call.) What does this comparison suggest about the queen's whisper?

Sir Gawain, from an illuminated manuscript

179 peradventure: perhaps.

WORDS TO KNOW **dejected** (dĭ-jĕk'tĭd) *adj.* sad; depressed

"Dear Mother," said the knight, "alack the day!
I am as good as dead if I can't say
What thing it is that women most desire;
If you could tell me I would pay your hire."
"Give me your hand," she said, "and swear to do
Whatever I shall next require of you
—If so to do should lie within your might—
And you shall know the answer before night."
"Upon my honor," he answered, "I agree."
"Then," said the crone, "I dare to guarantee
Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim.
Upon my life the queen will say the same.
Show me the very proudest of them all
In costly coverchief or jewelled caul
That dare say no to what I have to teach.
Let us go forward without further speech."
And then she crooned her gospel in his ear
And told him to be glad and not to fear.

They came to court. This knight, in full array,
Stood forth and said, "O Queen, I've kept my day
And kept my word and have my answer ready."

There sat the noble matrons and the heady
Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace
Of wisdom, all assembled in that place,
And there the queen herself was throned to hear
And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near
And silence was commanded through the hall.

The queen gave order he should tell them all
What thing it was that women wanted most.
He stood not silent like a beast or post,
But gave his answer with the ringing word
Of a man's voice and the assembly heard:

"My liege and lady, in general," said he,
"A woman wants the self-same sovereignty
Over her husband as over her lover,
And master him; he must not be above her.

WORDS TO KNOW

crone (krōn) *n.* an ugly old woman; hag

181 alack the day: an exclamation of sorrow, roughly equivalent to "Woe is me!"

The Knight and the Old Lady

194 coverchief: kerchief; **caul** (kaul): an ornamental hair-net.

197 gospel: message.

199 in full array: in all his finery.

202 heady: giddy; impetuous.

203 grace: gift.

213 liege (lēj): lord.

214 sovereignty (sŏv'ər-ĭn-tē): rule; power.

214–215 How might a woman's power over a lover differ from her power over a husband?

That is your greatest wish, whether you kill
Or spare me; please yourself. I wait your will."

In all the court not one that shook her head
Or contradicted what the knight had said;
Maid, wife and widow cried, "He's saved his life!"

And on the word up started the old wife,
The one the knight saw sitting on the green,
And cried, "Your mercy, sovereign lady queen!
Before the court disperses, do me right!
'Twas I who taught this answer to the knight,
For which he swore, and pledged his honor to it,
That the first thing I asked of him he'd do it,
So far as it should lie within his might.
Before this court I ask you then, sir knight,
To keep your word and take me for your wife;
For well you know that I have saved your life.
If this be false, deny it on your sword!"

"Alas!" he said, "Old lady, by the Lord
I know indeed that such was my behest,
But for God's love think of a new request,
Take all my goods, but leave my body free."
"A curse on us," she said, "if I agree!
I may be foul, I may be poor and old,
Yet will not choose to be, for all the gold
That's bedded in the earth or lies above,
Less than your wife, nay, than your very love!"

"My love?" said he. "By heaven, my damnation!
Alas that any of my race and station
Should ever make so foul a misalliance!"
Yet in the end his pleading and defiance
All went for nothing, he was forced to wed.
He takes his ancient wife and goes to bed.

Now peradventure some may well suspect
A lack of care in me since I neglect
To tell of the rejoicing and display
Made at the feast upon their wedding-day.
I have but a short answer to let fall;
I say there was no joy or feast at all,

235 behest (bĭ-hĕst′): promise.

244 race and station: family and rank.

245 misalliance (mĭs′ə-lī′əns): an unsuitable marriage.

Nothing but heaviness of heart and sorrow.
He married her in private on the morrow
And all day long stayed hidden like an owl,
It was such torture that his wife looked foul.

Great was the anguish churning in his head
When he and she were piloted to bed;
He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.
His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;
At last she said, "Bless us! Is this, my dear,
How knights and wives get on together here?
Are these the laws of good King Arthur's house?
Are knights of his all so contemptuous?
I am your own beloved and your wife,
And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;
And certainly I never did you wrong.
Then why, this first of nights, so sad a song?
You're carrying on as if you were half-witted.
Say, for God's love, what sin have I committed?
I'll put things right if you will tell me how."

"Put right?" he cried. "That never can be now!
Nothing can ever be put right again!
You're old, and so abominably plain,
So poor to start with, so low-bred to follow;
It's little wonder if I twist and wallow!
God, that my heart would burst within my breast!"

"Is that," said she, "the cause of your unrest?"

"Yes, certainly," he said, "and can you wonder?"

"I could set right what you suppose a blunder,
That's if I cared to, in a day or two,
If I were shown more courtesy by you.
Just now," she said, "you spoke of gentle birth,
Such as descends from ancient wealth and worth.
If that's the claim you make for gentlemen
Such arrogance is hardly worth a hen.
Whoever loves to work for virtuous ends,

256 the morrow: the next day.

260 piloted: led. (In the Middle Ages, it was customary for the wedding party to escort the bride and groom to their bedchamber.)

261 wallowed (wŏl'ōd): rolled around; thrashed about.

Dante and his Poem, Domenico di Michelino

WORDS TO KNOW

contemptuous (kən-tĕmp'chōō-əs) *adj.* scornful; openly disrespectful
abominably (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-blē) *adv.* unpleasantly; terribly

Public and private, and who most intends
To do what deeds of gentleness he can,
Take him to be the greatest gentleman.
Christ wills we take our gentleness from Him,
Not from a wealth of ancestry long dim,
Though they bequeath their whole establishment
By which we claim to be of high descent.
Our fathers cannot make us a bequest
Of all those virtues that became them best
And earned for them the name of gentlemen,
But bade us follow them as best we can.

285–292 What does the old woman think is the chief qualification of a gentleman? How would you define "gentle birth" and "gentleness" as used in this passage?

"Thus the wise poet of the Florentines,
Dante by name, has written in these lines,
For such is the opinion Dante launches:
'Seldom arises by these slender branches
Prowess of men, for it is God, no less,
Wills us to claim of Him our gentleness.'
For of our parents nothing can we claim
Save temporal things, and these may hurt and maim.

301 Florentines: the people of Florence, Italy.

302 Dante (dän'tā): a famous medieval Italian poet. The quotation in lines 304–306 is a paraphrase of a passage in Dante's most famous work, *The Divine Comedy,* which he completed in 1321.

"But everyone knows this as well as I;
For if gentility were implanted by
The natural course of lineage down the line,
Public or private, could it cease to shine
In doing the fair work of gentle deed?
No vice or villainy could then bear seed.

310 gentility (jĕn-tĭl'ĭ-tē): the quality possessed by a gentle, or noble, person.

"Take fire and carry it to the darkest house
Between this kingdom and the Caucasus,
And shut the doors on it and leave it there,
It will burn on, and it will burn as fair
As if ten thousand men were there to see,
For fire will keep its nature and degree,
I can assure you, sir, until it dies.

316 Caucasus (kô'kə-səs): a region of western Asia, between the Black and Caspian seas.

"But gentleness, as you will recognize,
Is not annexed in nature to possessions.
Men fail in living up to their professions;
But fire never ceases to be fire.

324 professions: beliefs; ideals.

WORDS TO KNOW

bequeath (bĭ-kwēth') *v.* to leave in a will; give as an inheritance
prowess (prou'ĭs) *n.* superior skill; great ability
temporal (tĕm'pər-əl) *adj.* of the material world; not eternal
maim (mām) *v.* to disable or permanently wound

God knows you'll often find, if you enquire,
Some lording full of villainy and shame.
If you would be esteemed for the mere name
Of having been by birth a gentleman
And stemming from some virtuous, noble clan,
And do not live yourself by gentle deed
Or take your father's noble code and creed,
You are no gentleman, though duke or earl.
Vice and bad manners are what make a churl.

"Gentility is only the renown
For bounty that your fathers handed down,
Quite foreign to your person, not your own;
Gentility must come from God alone.
That we are gentle comes to us by grace
And by no means is it bequeathed with place.

"Reflect how noble (says Valerius)
Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,
Who rose from poverty to nobleness.
And read Boethius, Seneca no less,
Thus they express themselves and are agreed:
'Gentle is he that does a gentle deed.'
And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude
That even if my ancestors were rude,
Yet God on high—and so I hope He will—
Can grant me grace to live in virtue still,
A gentlewoman only when beginning
To live in virtue and to shrink from sinning.

"As for my poverty which you reprove,
Almighty God Himself in whom we move,
Believe and have our being, chose a life
Of poverty, and every man or wife,
Nay, every child can see our Heavenly King
Would never stoop to choose a shameful thing.
No shame in poverty if the heart is gay,
As Seneca and all the learned say.
He who accepts his poverty unhurt
I'd say is rich although he lacked a shirt.
But truly poor are they who whine and fret
And covet what they cannot hope to get.
And he that, having nothing, covets not,

327 lording: lord; nobleman.

334 churl (chûrl): low-class person; boor. Why might the sentiment expressed in this line have been viewed as fairly radical in the Wife of Bath's day?

341 Valerius (və-lîr'ē-əs): Valerius Maximus, a Roman writer of the first century A.D. who compiled a collection of historical anecdotes.

342 Tullius (tŭl'ē-əs) **surnamed Hostilius** (hŏ-stĭl'ē-əs): Tullus Hostilius—in Roman legend, the third king of the Romans.

344 Boethius (bō-ē'thē-əs): a Christian philosopher of the Dark Ages; **Seneca** (sĕn'ĭ-kə): an ancient Roman philosopher, writer, teacher, and politician.

Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.

"True poverty can find a song to sing.
Juvenal says a pleasant little thing:
'The poor can dance and sing in the relief
Of having nothing that will tempt a thief.'
Though it be hateful, poverty is good,
A great incentive to a livelihood,
And a great help to our capacity
For wisdom, if accepted patiently.
Poverty is, though wanting in estate,
A kind of wealth that none calumniate.
Poverty often, when the heart is lowly,
Brings one to God and teaches what is holy,
Gives knowledge of oneself and even lends
A glass by which to see one's truest friends.
And since it's no offense, let me be plain;
Do not rebuke my poverty again.

"Lastly you taxed me, sir, with being old.
Yet even if you never had been told
By ancient books, you gentlemen engage,
Yourselves in honor to respect old age.
To call an old man 'father' shows good breeding,
And this could be supported from my reading.

"You say I'm old and fouler than a fen.
You need not fear to be a cuckold, then.
Filth and old age, I'm sure you will agree,
Are powerful wardens over chastity.
Nevertheless, well knowing your delights,
I shall fulfil your worldly appetites.

"You have two choices; which one will you try?
To have me old and ugly till I die,
But still a loyal, true, and humble wife
That never will displease you all her life,
Or would you rather I were young and pretty
And chance your arm what happens in a city
Where friends will visit you because of me,
Yes, and in other places too, maybe.

366 sot: fool.

368 Juvenal (jo͞o'və-nəl): an ancient Roman satirist.

375 wanting in estate: lacking in grandeur.

376 calumniate (kə-lŭm'nē-āt'): criticize with false statements; slander.

389 fen: marsh.

390 cuckold (kŭk'əld): a husband whose wife is unfaithful.

400 chance your arm: take your chance on.

WORDS TO KNOW

rebuke (rĭ-byo͞ok') *v.* to criticize

Which would you have? The choice is all your own."

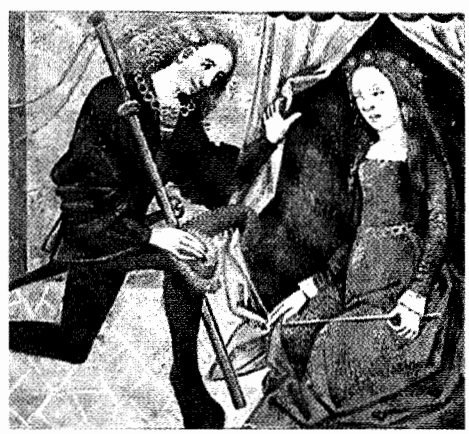
The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan
At last he said, with all the care in life,
"My lady and my love, my dearest wife,
I leave the matter to your wise decision.
You make the choice yourself, for the provision
Of what may be agreeable and rich
In honor to us both, I don't care which;
Whatever pleases you suffices me."

404 piteous (pĭt'ē-əs): pitiable; pathetic.

411 suffices (sə-fī'səz): satisfies. How does the knight's statement relate to what he has learned about "the thing that women most desire"?

"And have I won the mastery?" said she,
"Since I'm to choose and rule as I think fit?"
"Certainly, wife," he answered her, "that's it."
"Kiss me," she cried. "No quarrels! On my oath
And word of honor, you shall find me both,
That is, both fair and faithful as a wife;
May I go howling mad and take my life
Unless I prove to be as good and true
As ever wife was since the world was new!
And if to-morrow when the sun's above
I seem less fair than any lady-love,
Than any queen or empress east or west,
Do with my life and death as you think best.
Cast up the curtain, husband. Look at me!"

And when indeed the knight had looked to see,
Lo, she was young and lovely, rich in charms.
In ecstasy he caught her in his arms,
His heart went bathing in a bath of blisses
And melted in a hundred thousand kisses,
And she responded in the fullest measure
With all that could delight or give him pleasure.



The Lover and the Lady, from an illuminated manuscript

So they lived ever after to the end
In perfect bliss; and may Christ Jesus send
Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed,
And grace to overbid them when we wed.
And—Jesu hear my prayer!—cut short the lives
Of those who won't be governed by their wives;
And all old, angry niggards of their pence,
God send them soon a very pestilence!

439 niggards: misers.

WORDS TO KNOW

ecstasy (ĕk'stə-sē) *n.* intense joy or delight; bliss

Connect to the Literature

1. **What Do You Think?** Were you surprised by the outcome of the knight's quest? Why or why not?

Comprehension Check

- What change does the queen make in the knight's sentence?
- What information does the old woman give the knight?
- What happens to the old woman after the knight agrees to abide by her decision?

Think Critically

2. In what way is the question that the queen poses to the knight related to the crime that he has committed?

3. What **theme,** or message, about marriage would you say the tale conveys? Do you agree with the message? Why or why not?

4. ACTIVE READING ANALYZING STRUCTURE Look over your chart in your READER'S NOTEBOOK and review the reasons you inferred. What do the interruptions tell you about what matters to the Wife of Bath?

5. Consider the **narrator** of the "Prologue." How would you describe his values?

THINK ABOUT
- his characterizations of people like the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Wife of Bath
- his opinions of their actions
- his description of himself as "short of wit" in line 766 of the "Prologue" (page 134)

Extend Interpretations

6. **Comparing Texts** Which part of *The Canterbury Tales*—the "Prologue" or the two tales—did you find the most enjoyable or interesting? Give reasons for your choice.

7. **Critic's Corner** One critic has described Chaucer as "a modern writer," one whose work can be appreciated by every generation of readers. Do you agree with this observation? Cite specific passages of *The Canterbury Tales* to back up your opinion.

8. **Connect to Life** Do you see any similarities between the attitudes of the Wife of Bath and the old woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and the attitudes of modern American women? Cite details to support your answer.

Literary Analysis

NARRATOR The teller of a story in prose or verse is known as the story's **narrator.** The narrator may be a character in the story or a voice outside the action. In the "Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales,* a narrator (whom Chaucer identifies as himself) introduces several characters, who then narrate the various tales.

Cooperative Learning Activity In a small-group discussion, consider how the portrait of the Wife of Bath in lines 455–486 of the "Prologue" (page 125) relates to the tale that she tells. Then work with the group to create a chart in which you list as many details about the Wife of Bath as you can. Include details about her appearance, skills, social position, personality, attitudes, and motives.

Detail	Evidence
worthy	"Prologue," lines 455 and 469
somewhat deaf	"Prologue," line 456