

Canterbury Tales

Wife of Bath's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

late-fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

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Canterbury Tale from the Wife of Bath

Geoffrey Chaucer
late fourteenth century

In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour · Of which that Britons speken greet honour · Al was this land fulfild of fayerye –

In the days of King Arthur, whose memory is held in such high esteem, Britain was filled with the magic of an Otherworld. The Queen of Elves, with her jolly company, could often be seen dancing in the meadows, or so people thought; I speak of many hundreds of years ago, for there are no elves to be found anywhere now. Friars and churchmen have seen to that, spreading across the land as thickly as flecks of dust in a sunbeam, blessing everything in sight – halls and chambers, kitchens, bedrooms, towns and cities, castles, towers, woods and streams, ships, even dairies – so that now

the Otherworld has vanished away entirely. Where once there was an elf, now there is a friar, chanting his matins; ladies in orchards have only him to fear now!



It happened that King Arthur had in his household a young knight who, while he was riding one day beside a river, came upon a maiden who was walking all alone. Taking advantage of the situation, this young bachelor made love to the damsel against her will. The crime caused such an outcry among King Arthur's retinue that the wretch was soon caught

and sentenced to death, as the law required. But Queen Guinevere requested that he be handed over to her for punishment, and King Arthur gave her the knight, to do with as she wished. The queen thanked him.

'But do not imagine that your life is now safe,' she told her prisoner. 'I grant it to you only if you can answer the following question: tell me what it is that we women most desire. Think carefully, or your neck bone will feel the cutting power of iron! And if you cannot give me an answer immediately, I give you leave to search for a year and a day, wherever you please, and to return at the appointed time with your reply.'

This young knight was distraught, but what other choice did he have? So he set off, agreeing to return within a year and a day with his answer. He went everywhere he could think of, asking for advice and trying to discover what women love the most; but he could find no two answers the same. Some told him that women love jewels and wealth, others that it is honour they prize most highly. Some said jollity was most important, others clothes, or a good lover, or a frequent change of partner. Some said flattery, and

certainly this must rank high on the list, I should expect, for with the net of flattery, we women are all caught. Some advised him that we best like to be free and to do as we please, or not to have our shortcomings pointed out, but to be thought wise. For there is no woman who will not kick a man where it hurts for exposing her weaknesses; let a man try, and he will find the truth of this! However guilty we are, we like to be thought blameless. And some said that women like to be considered discrete, and steadfast. Ha! What a joke!

This knight, when he saw how hopeless things had become, began to get very depressed. The end of the year was approaching and it was time to return to King Arthur's court. So off he set, despondently. And as he rode through a forest, he came upon twenty-four ladies, or more, dancing in a circle. He rode towards the dancers eagerly, hoping to speak with them, but as he approached, they vanished, and in their place sat a filthy old crone. She arose and said: 'Sir knight, you have strayed from your path and have no business to be in this ancient place. What is it that you seek?'

'My dear lady,' said the knight, 'Unless I can discover what women most desire, I am a dead man. If you can tell me, I will reward you handsomely.'

This tale from the Wife of Bath is one of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral. Geoffrey wrote this tale towards the end of the fourteenth century, but like much of medieval storytelling, and certainly much of Geoffrey's storytelling, it reflects a fascination with times that were already ancient, and with the stories from a pre-Christian world.

In this particular instance, Chaucer draws not upon his usual classical Greek and Roman sources but upon Arthurian legend and Irish mythology. This tale, of a knight of King Arthur who encounters an ugly hag who turns into a beautiful woman, is very similar to a story told of the Irish warrior Diarmuid in the legends of Fionn mac Cumhaill that have come down to us from pagan Ireland.



'Give me your word, upon my hand, here, that you will do what I ask of you, if it lies in your power, and I will tell you what you wish to know.'

'I give you my word,' replied the knight.

'Then I guarantee that your life will be safe, for I pledge my own life that Queen Guinevere will say as I do. Let us see if anyone dares to refute what I shall teach you! Let us go at once.' Then she whispered something in his ear, and told him not to be fearful.

When they arrived at King Arthur's court, the knight announced that he had kept his pledge to return and to answer the question. All the women assembled, with Queen Guinevere sitting in judgement, to hear his answer. The knight was commanded to approach. The court fell silent, and he was formally required to tell the queen what women desire the most. This knight did not stand silently but answered at once, in a manly voice, so that all could hear: 'My liege lady,' he said, 'women desire to have power over the men in their lives; and though you may kill me, you may do as you please, for I am here at your command.'

Nobody in the court, neither widow, wife nor maiden, could find any reason to argue against this reply, and all said that the knight deserved to keep his life. At this, the old crone stood up and said: 'Mercy, my sovereign lady queen. Give me justice before the court departs. I instructed this knight to give the answer he did on the condition that he would do something for me, if it lay in his power. Before this court, therefore, I require, Sir knight, that you take me as your wife. For be in no doubt that I have saved your life. If you dispute this, then refuse me!'



'You speak the truth, alas!' he replied. 'But release me from this bond! Take all my wealth, but leave me my body!'

'No!' she cried. 'For though I am old, and filthy, and poor, not for all the gold and wealth that lies in the Earth shall I release you. You shall be my husband and my love.'

'My love?' said the knight. 'My damnation! Alas, that I should be so humiliated!'

But it was all to no avail, for the knight had to marry her, and take her to his bed. Now some will say that I am at fault for neglecting to describe the clothes and the jollity and the dishes served at their wedding. But I would reply that there is no joy at all to describe, only sorrow and lamentation, and there was no feasting. The couple were married privately the very next day, and the knight hid himself for shame.

His woes only increased when it was time to go to bed. He tossed and turned. His wife lay smiling and said: 'Does every knight behave as you do in bed? Is this King Arthur's rule? I have saved your life, so why do you act like this on our first night together? You are behaving like an imbecile. Tell me what is the matter, and I will remedy it, if I can.'

'Remedy it!' exclaimed the knight. 'How can you remedy it that you are so ugly, and old, and lowborn. I wish I could die!'

'Is this the cause of your unrest?' she replied.

'Do you doubt it?'

'I could remedy it, if I chose to. You call me poor, and of low estate. But gentility comes not through birth but through one's own virtue. A Lord's son may do shameful and villainous things. A man born into poverty may rise to great estate, as has been seen in ancient Rome. And therefore, though my ancestors were lowborn, may God give me the grace to live virtuously. And as to poverty, our Lord Jesus Christ chose this way of life, for it holds no dishonour. He who is satisfied at his poverty, I hold him rich, though he lacks even a shirt. He who covets others' wealth is poor, for he cannot find contentment. But a poor man who desires nothing more is rich. Juvenal said that a poor man, when he travels, may sing and play before the thieves! Poverty is a bringer of wisdom, and

through it a man may find not only himself and his true friends, but God. So do not reproach me for my poverty.

‘And as to age, do you noblemen not teach that respect and honour should be shown to the elderly? You say that I am foul and old, so you need have no fear that I will dishonour you by being unfaithful. For filth and age are great keepers of chastity! But nonetheless, since I know your desires, I shall bring satisfaction to all your appetites.

‘Choose now,’ she said, ‘one of these two alternatives. To have me foul and old until I die, and be a true wife to you, and never displease you, or else have me young and fair and take your chance that I may bring dishonour to your house and to your reputation. Choose whichever you like.

This knight pondered, and sighed, and at last said: ‘My lady and my love, and wife so dear, I put myself in your wise governance. Choose yourself, whatever will be best for us both. I will do whatever you wish.’

‘Then I am in charge,’ she said, ‘and may choose and dictate as I like?’

‘Yes,’ replied the knight. ‘I think that that is best.’

‘Kiss me, then,’ she said. ‘And unless I am as attractive as the most beautiful lady in all this world, you can do what you like with me. Lift up the curtain, and look.’

And when the knight saw how beautiful she was, and how young, he took her up in his arms, his heart bathed in bliss, and kissed her a thousand times! And all that night she pandered to his every wish and desire. And thus they lived, for the rest of their lives, in perfect joy and happiness.