

Summary of the Wife of Bath's Tale

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/c/the-canterbury-tales/summary-and-analysis/the-wife-of-baths-prologue-and-tale>

The Wife of Bath's tale reiterates her belief (well-expressed in the Prologue) that a happy match is one in which the wife has control.

A lusty young knight in King Arthur's court rapes a beautiful young maiden. The people are repulsed by the knight's behavior and demand justice. Although the law demands that the knight be beheaded, the queen and ladies of the court beg to be allowed to determine the knight's fate. The queen then gives the knight a year **to discover what women most desire.**

The year passes quickly. As the knight rides dejectedly back to the court knowing that he will lose his life, he suddenly sees 24 young maidens dancing and singing. As he approaches them, the maidens disappear, and the only living creature is a foul old woman, who approaches him and asks what he seeks. The knight explains his quest, and the old woman promises him the right answer if he will do what she demands for saving his life. The knight agrees. When the queen bids the knight to speak, **he responds correctly that women most desire sovereignty over their husbands.**

Having supplied him with the right answer, the old crone demands that she be his wife and his love. The knight, in agony, agrees. On their wedding night, the knight pays no attention to the foul woman next to him. When she questions him, he confesses that her age, ugliness, and low breeding are repulsive to him. **The old hag reminds him that true gentility is not a matter of appearances but of virtue. She tells him that her looks can be viewed as an asset. If she were beautiful, many men would be after her; in her present state, however, he can be assured that he has a virtuous wife.** She offers him a choice: an old ugly hag such as she, but still a loyal, true, and virtuous wife, or a beautiful woman with whom he must take his chances. **The knight says the choice is hers. And because she has "won the mastery," she tells him, "'Kiss me . . . and you shall find me both . . . fair and faithful as a wife.'** Indeed, she had become a lovely young woman, and they lived happily ever after.