

The Wife of Bath's Tale from The Canterbury Tales

BY GEOFFREY CHAUCER

TRANSLATED BY GERALDINE MCCAUGHREAN

From the mightiest of monarchs to the lowest of peasants, medieval life was built on inequality, but no class of people were more limited in their choices than were women. Geoffrey Chaucer, however, included two female characters in his Canterbury Tales. One of them, the Wife of Bath, is as strong and vibrant as the men around her.

The Wife of Bath is a determined and lusty woman who knows exactly what she wants and how to accomplish it. Before telling the following tale, she relates incidents from her five marriages that show that she indeed has had her own way in almost everything. We compare her with the women in her tale and see that she is mocking the olden days of chivalry and its powerless women.

In the old days of glory, when King Arthur's Round Table stood in Camelot, chivalrous knights sat and talked of Love. Damsels embroidered tokens of Love. Squires composed Love songs, and jousts were fought over Love. Hardly a word was spoken that was not of Love. Only when men and women *met* did they talk about the weather instead.

"How blue the sky is, lady," a young man would say.

"And how warm the breeze," she would reply.

"And how is your mother?" he would ask.

"Quite well, considering the weather," she would answer.

Then he would bow, and she would smile, and they would go their separate ways.

So it was at Camelot until the hot-blooded Sir Salvio met one day with a lady in a wood.

"How blue the sky is today," said the lady, smiling encouragingly.

"Almost as blue as your lovely eyes, lady," he said.



The lady blushed. "How prettily the water glistens in the brook."

"Almost as sweet to taste as a kiss of your lips," said the knight, and he helped himself to a kiss. The lady picked up her green skirts, and shrieked and swooped like a parrot in and out of the trees, all the way back to the Court.

So the over-romantic knight was summoned before the assembly of the Round Table. "This most starless of knights," said King Arthur, "has cast his shadow over an honourable lady in the wood. What punishment should he suffer?"

In one voice, the Knights cried, "DEATH! Cut off his head!"

Sir Salvio was most dismayed. But he bowed low from the waist, and Arthur unsheathed his sword.

"One last question," said the knight, straightening up again. "Perhaps the excellent Queen Guinevere can tell me: what exactly did I *do* to offend the lady in the wood?"

"What did you *do*?" exclaimed the Queen. "You spoke of kisses when you should have been talking about the weather!"

"Ah. I see." Sir Salvio sighed and bowed from the waist again. "I don't think

I understand women." The shadow of the sword touched his bare neck.

The ladies of the court began to faint. Like swathes of corn behind a sickle, they fell daintily to the floor. The Queen herself looked with regret on Sir Salvio. His hair was the colour of powdered sage and as curly as the tendrils of a honeysuckle. "Well, well," she said, fluttering her hands. "Since this young man seeks to understand women, let him answer me this riddle. Let him tell me What Women Most Desire, and he shall live."

Arthur leaned wearily on his sword. "You have one year and a day, boy, in which to discover What Women Most Desire."

As Sir Salvio left the Court, his knees trembled and his heart still pounded. What chance did he stand of answering the Queen's riddle? What man can guess what a woman is thinking? "What do Women Most Desire?" he pondered, as his horse shambled along the country roads. "Beauty, surely."

But then he remembered money. Surely women wanted gold more than anything in the world.

He passed a young farm girl on the road, arm-in-arm with a shepherd. "Tell me, good girl, what do you want most in this world — to be rich or to be beautiful?"

The farm girl hung more heavily on the shepherd's arm and sighed. "Neither, sir. All I want is to be married!"

"Aha!" The knight took out a quill, and wrote on the sleeve of his shirt. Then he turned back, thinking to take the answer to the Queen at once.

On the way, he passed a convent where nuns, as white as cannikins of milk in the morning sun, were tending a field of beans. "What that girl told me cannot be true," thought Sir Salvio with dismay. "So many women choose to live unmarried!"

Just then, he passed a roadside shrine. In front of it, a woman was down on her knees praying fervently.

"Forgive me interrupting your prayers," said Sir Salvio, "but what is it that you ask so earnestly of God?"

The woman got painfully to her feet and took up her baskets again. "Only what every woman wants, I suppose," she said bitterly. "I want to have a baby."

"Aha!" he said, and noted her words on his sleeve.

By sunset, there were twelve other notes written below it.

Sir Salvio's heart sank lower and lower. Only one answer could be right. How was he to choose it from the rest? He fingered his bare neck and thought of the sword awaiting it.

Farther and farther afield he travelled. Taking ship, he sailed to a hot and passionate country where gypsy women dressed in scarlet, and their dark skin sweated as they danced tarantellas under a tambourine moon. "What do

Women Most Desire?" he asked a girl as she whirled past his stirrup, tossing her lace-edged petticoats.

"Fun, of course!" cried the gypsy. "Fun and laughter and love and music and passion and the clash of the moon and the spark of the stars, and to stay young forever!"

"Thank you *very* much." He could find no scrap of sleeve on which to write all her answers.

On and on he travelled, through lands of ice where women would not part their frozen lips to answer him — through wastelands where all the women wanted was the next meal for their children. Finally time ran short, and he turned back to keep his appointment with the King's deadline. To be one day late at Camelot would dishonour him, for the other knights would think he was fearful of the sword's edge.

So it was that he came to be riding at a gallop through the Forests of Dean on the last day, when he saw an old crone boiling up water in a cauldron.

"Old woman!" he shouted out. "Boil my shirt, for I have slept in it this year past, and today I must present myself before the Queen of England." He handed her the shirt on which he had scrawled the answer of every woman he had met.

The old hag held up each sleeve in turn. "What's this, then?" she lisped through two black teeth. "*Love, Money, Passion, Power, Beauty, Children, Long*

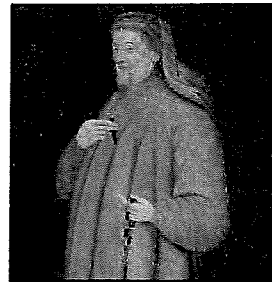
IN CONTEXT BACKGROUNDER

Chaucer's England

Geoffrey Chaucer was born around 1340, a time when people ate with their fingers, seldom washed, blew their noses on their sleeves, and fought frequent and bloody battles in the streets.

There was much to keep the storytellers busy in fourteenth century England. Overpopulation, famine, a changing climate, the plague, and a peasants' revolt made this a time of turmoil and great change. But it was also an age when flamboyant kings held court, providing the poets and storytellers with romance and chivalry as well as grief and destruction.

Chaucer spent a great deal of his life in the service of kings, but this glamorous life never made him lose sight of the common people. His



writing is full of lively characters from almost all classes and walks of life.

In his most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes a varied group of travellers going to a religious site at Canterbury. A story competition is suggested to pass the time, and the tales that follow are by turn sensational, romantic, moralistic, and wicked. Chaucer's characters become real to us, from each detail of their appearance to the attitudes they reveal in the stories they tell. Through them Chaucer tells remarkable tales that, centuries later, unveil medieval England in all its splendour and squalor.

life, Fame...these are the stuff of women's wishes!"

"Mind your own business, weasely one, and boil the shirt. I'm sick and tired of asking *What Women Most Desire*."

The shirt plunged into the cauldron, and the bubbles that rose gave strangely feminine sighs.

"*What Women Most Desire*? Oh, I can tell you *that*, lording. But my answer has a price. What I desire most is to marry a handsome knight with hair of just your colour and curls of just your kind. If I were to tell you the answer, you would have to marry me."

"I'd gladly marry even you, Dame Cockroach, for the sake of the *right* answer. But I've heard so many now, that I daresay I've already heard yours from someone else."

The old crone shrugged her humped shoulders and gave him back his shirt, dripping and steaming. "*What Women Most Desire* is to have their own way in everything," she said.

"Fine, fine." Sir Salvio galloped off, intent on keeping his appointment with the Queen.

Knee to knee at the Round Table, the Knights of King Arthur sat playing cards. The ladies sat talking of Love among themselves. "I hardly expected to see you again, boy," said the King. The women's chatter subsided. The Knights at the Table turned to listen.

"And have you found an answer to my riddle?" asked the Queen.

Sir Salvio knelt and kissed the hem of her robe. "Madam, I have a thousand." Then he searched his shirtsleeves for just one that might save his life. But the shining whiteness of the linen almost blinded him, and just as the sleeves were clean of words, so was his memory a blank. The only answer he could recollect was the last one he had been told. "*What Women Most Desire is to have their own way in everything.*"

"Oh! Sorcery!" squeaked the Queen in delicious horror. "No *man* ever worked that out for himself! I'm glad you have saved your life, Sir Salvio, for your hair *is* the colour of powdered sage and as curly as the tendrils of the honeysuckle. But *who told you the answer?*"

"I did, Queen Guinevere," croaked an elderly voice. And there, perched on the back of the knight's horse where it stood tethered by the door, was the old forest crone. Her legs were as thin and knobbled as a chicken's. Here and there she had hair, but it grew only where it should not. The ladies of the Court put their handkerchiefs to their mouths and gave little cries of distaste. "I told this fair knight the answer, and in return he promised to marry me...Don't look so surprised to see me, sweetheart. I jumped up behind you as you put on your shirt. I did not want to delay our marriage by so much as a single day."

In a gesture of wild despair, Sir Salvio threw himself headlong at King Arthur's feet. "Lord, be merciful and cut off my head here and now! For life will be worse than death if I have to marry this...this..."

"Sir!" The Queen's voice was loud and forbidding. "Kindly remember that chivalry is the first law of this Court!"

But the knight bared his neck and thrust his sword into King Arthur's hand. "*Please* cut off my head, your majesty!"

Like a monstrous land crab, half in and half out of its skin, the hag limped forward. "Nay, for that would deprive me of my reward. I claim my husband, and the law must give him to me!"

Then Sir Salvio threw himself at her pigeon-toed feet. "Take my horse, take my sword—my armour. Take everything I own in the world, but spare my body! You don't know how I have dreamed of one day tasting love in the arms of a young and lovely wife!"

The antique bride gave one wild shriek of laughter and linked her arm through his. "I am yours to command now, husband," she said. "Yours as much as your horse or your sword or the shirt on your back!"

Then the King joined the hands of the bride and groom. "I give you the White Wing of Camelot for your nuptial home."

Never was there a wedding celebrated with fewer smiles and less dancing. The groom led his bride directly to the White Wing, thinking to hide his shame within its walls. At the foot of the stairs, she tugged on his arm. "This is the threshold of our home," she said in a voice that crackled like burning stubble. "So lift me in your arms and carry me over the threshold."

Sharp with bones and as heavy as brass, she weighed like a ship's anchor in his arms, but he carried her to their bedchamber and laid her on the white bed. "I'll sleep in the next room, lady."

"Nay, for then we would not be married! Man and wife should sleep in the same bed."

Sir Salvio lay down beside her in his clothes, staring at the ceiling, and tears ran down into his ears. Beside him, she smiled a toothless and frothy smile. "Is this any way to behave on your wedding night?" she said. "What have I done—tell me, sweetheart—nothing but save your life by answering the Queen's riddle? What's the matter with me, love?"

"What's the matter with you?" He gave a great groan. "Nothing you could alter, lady. You're an ugly old washerwoman, that's all."

She gave another of those cacophonous laughs. "Oh, is it my *ugliness*, then? Why, I thought you'd be glad!"

He lifted himself on one elbow and stared at her, his eyes blinded with tears. "*Glad?*"

"Yes, glad. A pretty wife is often a worry to a man. All the time he's away fighting, or questing, or taking his horse to the blacksmith, he has it in mind to wonder, 'What is she doing now? Which of my friends is flirting with her? Has she run off yet with my squire or my serving man?'"

He nodded his head and smiled forlornly. "In all my travels during this last year, I have not met one pretty woman I would trust." And he closed his eyes in despair...

But when he opened them again, there on the bed beside him, in a gown of green velvet that put him in mind of cedar trees, lay the lady of his dreams. Her hair was the colour of powdered honeysuckle and she smelt of sage.

Only in the days of glory, when fairies were as many as the motes of dust floating in a sunbeam, could a man have found himself married to a fairy.

"Yes, it is still I, the washerwoman from the forest," said the fairy bride. "And now the choice is yours. Will you have me like this, or in my other form? Shall I be ugly, but love you truly, all the days of my life? Or shall I be beautiful — and a worry to you each night of your life? Shall I be waiting here for you every evening, bent and crooked but loving and loyal? Or shall I be beautiful when I hang on your arm in the gardens and in the great moot hall when there are other eyes to wink at me? Come on, decide now and never speak of it again."

In all his travels he had never seen so lovely a lady. Sir Salvio breathed in to claim her beauty. Yes, yes, he would have her be beautiful.

Then he suddenly thought of the white sleep he would lose lying in the White Wing of Camelot while his wife was dancing the night away with other men. He thought of how the bright light of her beauty would show up all the lines and wrinkles of his own old age, and she would tire of him. And he thought of the evil of owning a lovely wife — without owning her love!

"Lady-fairy and wife of my life," he said at last. "Since I learned today What Women Most Desire, I know that YOU, not I, must choose. Be beautiful or be good. It shall be as you desire."

The fairy gave one wild whoop of laughter and put her arms around his neck. Her mouth was a well of kisses. "Because you gave this answer," she said, "you may have me in my fairy shape *and* keep my love and loyalty always. I will be good and faithful and I will be always waiting for you here in the White Wing of Camelot. For never in the history of human beings has a Man learned so quickly What Women Most Desire!"

So every night the White Wing of Camelot resounded to their laughter. And during the day, Sir Salvio was the envy of every other knight. For he had a wife who never talked about the weather and who liked nothing better than a kiss in the wood from her beloved knight!