

## The Wife of Bath's Tale

In the old days of King Arthur, today  
Still praised by Britons in a special way,  
This land was filled with fairies all about.  
The elf-queen with her jolly little rout  
In many a green field often danced. Indeed  
This was the old belief of which I read;  
I speak of many hundred years ago.  
But now such elves no one is seeing. No,  
For now the prayers and charitable desires  
Of limiters and other holy friars  
Who wander all the land, by every stream,  
As thick as specks of dust in a sunbeam,  
To bless our halls, chambers, kitchens, bowers,  
Boroughs, cities, castles, lofty towers,  
Villages, granaries, stables, dairies,  
Have made sure that no longer are there fairies.  
For where there once was wont to walk an elf  
There's walking now the limiter himself,  
Early and late, to give his auspices,  
Say matins and his other offices,  
Go all about the limit where he's found.  
Now women may go safely all around;  
In every bush and under every tree  
He is the only incubus, and he  
Won't do a thing except dishonor them.

It happened that King Arthur had with him  
A bachelor in his house; this lusty liver,  
While riding from his hawking by the river,  
Once chanced upon, alone as she was born,  
A maiden who was walking—soon forlorn,  
For he, despite all that she did or said,  
By force deprived her of her maidenhead.  
Because of this, there was such clamoring  
And such demand for justice to the king,  
This knight was all but numbered with the dead  
By course of law, and should have lost his head  
(Which may have been the law in that milieu).  
But then the queen and other ladies too

Prayed so long that the king might grant him grace, 895  
King Arthur spared him for at least a space;  
He left him to the queen to do her will,  
860 To choose to save or order them to kill.

The queen then thanked the king with all her might,  
And after this the queen spoke with the knight 900  
When she saw opportunity one day.  
“For you,” she said, “things stand in such a way  
865 You can't be sure if you're to live or not.  
I'll grant you life if you can tell me what  
It is that women most desire. Beware 905  
The iron ax, your neckbone now to spare!  
And if you cannot tell me right away,  
870 I'll give you leave, a twelvemonth and a day,  
That you may go to seek, that you might find  
An answer that is of sufficient kind. 910  
I want your word before you take a pace:  
You'll bring yourself back to this very place.”

875 This knight with sorrow sighed, was full of woe.  
What could he do? Not as he pleased, and so  
To go away was what he finally chose, 915  
To come back when his year was at its close  
With such an answer as God might provide.  
880 He took his leave and forth he went to ride.

He sought in every house and every place  
In hopes he could secure the promised grace 920  
By learning that which women love the most.  
But he did not arrive at any coast  
885 Where he could find two people on the matter  
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.  
Some said that women all love riches best, 925  
While some said honor, others jolly zest,  
Some rich array; some said delights in bed,  
890 And many said to be a widow wed;  
Some others said that our hearts are most eased  
When we are flattered and when we are pleased— 930  
And he was nigh the truth, if you ask me.  
A man shall win us best with flattery;

With much attendance, charm, and application  
Can we be caught, whatever be our station.

Some said our love to which we all aspire  
Is to be free to do as we desire,

With no reproof of vice but with the rule  
That men should say we're wise, not one a fool.

For truly there is none among us all

Who, if a man should claw us on the gall, 940  
Won't kick for being told the truth; he who  
Does an assay will find out that it's true.

But though we may have vices kept within,  
We like to be called wise and clean of sin.

And some say that we take the most delight 945  
In keeping secrets, keeping our lips tight,  
To just one purpose striving to adhere:  
Not to betray one thing that we may hear.  
That tale's not worth the handle of a rake.

We women can't keep secrets, heaven's sake!  
Just look at Midas—would you hear the tale? 950

Ovid, among the trifles he'd detail,  
Said Midas had long hair, for it appears  
That on his head had grown two ass's ears.  
This defect he had tried as best he might 955  
To keep well as he could from others' sight,  
And save his wife there was none who could tell.  
He loved her much and trusted her as well  
And prayed that not one living creature she  
Would ever tell of his deformity. 960

She swore she'd not, though all the world to win,  
Be guilty of such villainy and sin

And make her husband have so foul a name.  
To tell it would as well bring her to shame.

But nonetheless she all but nearly died, 965  
So long to have a secret she must hide.

She thought it swelled so sorely in her heart  
Some word from out of her was bound to start;

And since she dared to tell it to no man,  
Down close beside a marsh the lady ran—

She had to rush, her heart was so afire.  
Then like a bittern booming in the mire,

She put her mouth down to the water, saying,

“Water, make no sound, don't be betraying,

For I will tell this to no one but you. 975

My husband has long ass's ears—it's true!”

She thought, “My heart is cured now, it is out;

I couldn't keep it longer, there's no doubt.”

So as you see, we may awhile abide

But it must out, no secret we can hide. 980

(As for the tale, if you would hear the rest,

Read Ovid, for that's where you'll learn it best.)

This knight of whom my tale is all about,

When seeing that he couldn't find it out—

That is to say, what women love the most— 985

Felt in his breast already like a ghost;

For home he headed, he could not sojourn,

The day had come when homeward he must turn.

And in this woeful state he chanced to ride

While on his way along a forest side, 990

And there he saw upon the forest floor

Some ladies dancing, twenty-four or more.

Toward these dancers he was quick to turn

In hope that of some wisdom he might learn;

But all at once, before he'd gotten there, 995

The dancers disappeared, he knew not where.

He didn't see one creature bearing life,

Save sitting on the green one single wife.

An uglier creature no mind could devise.

To meet him this old wife was to arise, 1000

And said, “You can't get there from here, Sir Knight.

What are you seeking, by your faith? It might

Well be to your advantage, sir, to tell;

Old folks like me know many things, and well.”

“Dear mother,” said the knight, “it is for sure 965

That I am dead if I cannot secure

What thing it is that women most desire.

If you could teach me, gladly I would hire.”

“Give me your word here in my hand,” said she,

“The next thing I request you'll do for me 1010

If it's a thing that lies within your might,

And I will tell you then before it's night.”

The knight said, "Here's my oath, I guarantee."      If it's a thing that lies within his might.  
 "Then certainly I dare to boast," said she,      Before the court I therefore pray, Sir Knight,"  
 "Your life is safe, for I'll be standing by;      1015 She said, "that you will take me as your wife;      1055  
 Upon my life, the queen will say as I.      For well you know that I have saved your life.  
 Let's see who is the proudest of them all,      If I speak falsely, by your faith accuse me."  
 With kerchief or with headdress standing tall,      The knight replied, "Alas, how woes abuse me!  
 Who shall deny that which I have to teach.      I know I made the promise you've expressed.  
 Now let us go, no need to make a speech."      1020 For love of God, please choose a new request.      1060  
 She whispered then a message in his ear      Take all my goods and let my body go."  
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.      "No, damn us both then!" she replied. "For though  
 When they had come to court, the knight declared,      I may be ugly, elderly, and poor,  
 "I've come back to the day, and to be spared,      I'd give all of the metal and the ore  
 For I am now prepared to give reply."      1025 That lies beneath the earth and lies above      1065  
 The noble wives and maidens stood nearby,      If only I could be your wife and love."  
 And widows too (who were considered wise);      "My love?" he said. "No, rather my damnation!  
 The queen sat like a justice in her guise.      Alas! that there is any of my nation  
 All these had been assembled there to hear,      Who ever could so foully be disgraced."  
 And then the knight was summoned to appear.      1030 But all for naught, the end was that he faced      1070  
 Full silence was commanded in the court      Constraint, for he now would have to wed  
 So that the knight might openly report      And take his gray old wife with him to bed.  
 The thing that worldly women love the best.      Now there are some men who might say perhaps  
 He stood not like a beast at one's behest      That it's my negligence or else a lapse  
 But quickly gave his answer loud and clear,      1035 That I don't tell you of the joyous way      1075  
 With manly voice that all the court might hear.      In which the feast took place that very day.  
 "My liege and lady, generally," said he,      I'll answer briefly should the question fall:  
 "What women most desire is sovereignty      There wasn't any joy or feast at all,  
 Over their husbands or the ones they love,      Just lots of sorrow, things went grievously.  
 To have the mastery, to be above.      1040 He married her that morning privately,      1080  
 This is your most desire, though you may kill      Then all that day he hid just like an owl,  
 Me if you wish. I'm here, do as you will."  
 No wife or maid or widow in the court      So woeful, for his wife looked really foul.  
 Saw fit to contradict the knight's report;      Great was the woe the knight had in his head  
 They all agreed, "He's worthy of his life."      1045 He tossed and then he turned both to and fro.      1085  
 And with that word up started the old wife,      His old wife lay there smiling at him, though,  
 The one the knight had seen upon the green.      And said, "Dear husband, benedicite!  
 "Mercy," she said, "my sovereign lady queen!      Acts every knight toward his wife this way?  
 Before your court departs, grant me my right.      Is this the law of great King Arthur's house?  
 It's I who taught this answer to the knight,      1050 Is every knight of his so distant? Spouse,      1090  
 For which he gave a solemn oath to me:      I am your own true love and I'm your wife  
 The first thing I request he'd do for me      And I'm the one as well who saved your life,

And I have never done you wrong or spite.  
 Why do you treat me so on our first night?  
 You act just like a man who's lost his wit. 1095  
 What is my guilt? For God's love, tell me it,  
 And it shall be amended if I may."  
 "Amended?" asked the knight. "Whatever way?  
 There's no way it could ever be amended.  
 You are so old and loathsome—and descended, 1100  
 To add to that, from such a lowly kind—  
 No wonder that I toss and turn and wind.  
 I wish to God my heart would burst, no less!"  
 "Is this," she said, "the cause of your distress?"  
 "Why, yes," said he, "and is there any wonder?"  
 She said, "I could amend the stress you're under,  
 If you desire, within the next three days,  
 If you'll treat me more kindly in your ways.  
 "But when you talk about gentility  
 Like old wealth handed down a family tree, 1110  
 That this is what makes of you gentlemen,  
 Such arrogance I judge not worth a hen.  
 Take him who's always virtuous in his acts  
 In public and in private, who exacts  
 Of himself all the noble deeds he can, 1115  
 And there you'll find the greatest gentleman.  
 Christ wills we claim nobility from him,  
 Not from our elders or the wealth of them;  
 For though they give us all their heritage  
 And we claim noble birth by parentage, 1120  
 They can't bequeath—all else theirs for the giving—  
 To one of us the virtuous way of living  
 That made the nobles they were known to be,  
 The way they bade us live in like degree.  
 "How well the poet wise, the Florentine 1125  
 Named **Dante**, speaks about just what I mean,  
 And this is how he rhymes it in his story:  
 'Of men who climb their family trees for glory,  
 Few will excel, for it is by God's grace  
 We gain nobility and not by race.' 1130  
 No, from our elders all that we can claim  
 Are temporal things such as may hurt and maim.

"All know as I, that if gentility  
 Were something that was planted naturally  
 Through all a certain lineage down the line, 1135  
 In private and in public they'd be fine  
 And noble people doing what is nice,  
 Completely free of villainy and vice.  
 "Take fire into the darkest house or hut  
 Between here and Mount Caucasus, then shut 1140  
 The doors, and all men leave and not return;  
 That fire will still remain as if the burn  
 Were being watched by twenty thousand souls.  
 Its function will not cease, its nature holds,  
 On peril of my life, until it dies. 1145  
 "Gentility, you then should realize,  
 Is not akin to things like property;  
 For people act with much variety,  
 Not like the fire that always is the same.  
 God knows that men may often find, for shame, 1150  
 A lord's son who's involved in villainy.  
 Who prides himself to have gentility  
 Because it happens he's of noble birth,  
 With elders virtuous, of noble worth,  
 But never tries to do a noble deed 1155  
 Nor follow in his dead ancestors' lead,  
 Is not a noble, be he duke or earl;  
 For bad and sinful deeds just make a churl.  
 Sir, your gentility is but the fame  
 Of your ancestors, who earned their good name 1160  
 With qualities quite foreign to your own.  
 Gentility can come from God alone,  
 So true gentility's a thing of grace,  
 Not something that's bequeathed by rank or place.  
 "For nobleness, as says Valerius, 1165  
 Consider Tullius Hostilius:  
 Though poor, he rose to noble heights. Look in  
 Boethius or Seneca, and when  
 You do, don't doubt the truth of what you read:  
 The noble is the man of noble deed. 1170  
 And so, dear husband, thus I will conclude:  
 If it's true my ancestors were so rude,

Yet may the Lord, as I do hope, grant me  
 The grace to live my life most virtuously;  
 For I'm a noble when I so begin  
 To live in virtue and avoid sin.

“For poverty you scold me. By your leave,  
 The God on high, in whom we both believe,  
 Chose willfully to live a poor man's life;  
 And surely every man, maiden, or wife  
 Can understand that Jesus, heaven's King,  
 Would not choose sinful living. It's a thing  
 Of honor to be poor without despair,  
 As Seneca and other clerks declare.  
 To be poor yet contented, I assert,  
 Is to be rich, though having not a shirt.  
 The one who covets is the poorer man,  
 For he would have that which he never can;  
 But he who doesn't have and doesn't crave  
 Is rich, though you may hold him but a knave.  
 True poverty's been sung of properly;  
 As Juvenal said of it, 'Merrily  
 The poor man, as he goes upon his way,  
 In front of every thief can sing and play.'  
 It is a hateful good and, as I guess,  
 A great promoter of industriousness.  
 A source of greater wisdom it can be  
 For one who learns to bear it patiently.  
 Though it seem wearisome, poverty is  
 Possession none will take from you as his.  
 Poverty often makes a fellow know  
 Himself as well as God when he is low.  
 Poverty is an eyeglass, I contend,  
 Through which a man can see a truthful friend.  
 I bring no harm at all to you, therefore  
 Do not reprove me, sire, for being poor.

“For being old you've also fussed at me;  
 Yet surely, sire, though no authority  
 Were in a book, you gentlemen select  
 Say men should treat an elder with respect  
 And call him father, by your courtesy.  
 I think I could find authors who agree.

“If I am old and ugly, as you've said,  
 Of cuckoldry you needn't have a dread;  
 For filthiness and age, as I may thrive,  
 Are guards that keep one's chastity alive.  
 But nonetheless, since I know your delight,  
 I shall fulfill your worldly appetite.

“Choose now,” she said, “one of these two: that I  
 Be old and ugly till the day I die,  
 And be to you a true and humble wife,  
 One never to displease you all your life;  
 Or if you'd rather, have me young and fair,  
 And take your chance on those who will repair  
 To your house now and then because of me  
 (Or to some other place, it may well be).  
 Choose for yourself the one you'd rather try.”

The knight gave it some thought, then gave a sigh,  
 And finally answered as you are to hear:  
 “My lady and my love and wife so dear,  
 I leave to your wise governance the measure;  
 You choose which one would give the fullest pleasure  
 And honor to you, and to me as well.  
 I don't care which you do, you best can tell.  
 What you desire is good enough for me.”

“You've given me,” she said, “the mastery?  
 The choice is mine and all's at my behest?”

“Yes, surely, wife,” said he, “I think it best.”

“Then kiss me, we'll no longer fight,” she said,  
 “For you've my oath that I'll be both instead—  
 That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.  
 I pray to God I die in mad despair  
 Unless I am to you as good and true  
 As any wife since this old world was new.  
 Come dawn, if I'm not as fair to be seen  
 As any lady, empress, any queen  
 Who ever lived between the east and west,  
 Then take my life or do whatever's best.  
 Lift up the curtains now, see how it is.”

And when the knight had truly seen all this,  
 How she was young and fair in all her charms,  
 In utter joy he took her in his arms;