"The Wife of Bath's Tale," lines 1 – 56
After a lengthy prologue in which the Wife argues for, among other things, women's sovereignty in marriage, she begins her tale. But not before taking a swipe at the Friar, who has just interrupted her: In a mini-prologue to her tale, she hints that friars may not be as holy as they profess to be.

Once the tale gets rolling, we learn that it is set in the court of King Arthur. Soon after we are introduced to the protagonist. A knight and "lusty bachelor" of Arthur's court, he rapes a young woman. As punishment, he is sentenced to death, but due to the appeals of the women of the court, his fate is put in the queen's hands. She says she will spare his life if he can answer one question: What is it that women desire above all things? She gives him one year and a day to come up with the correct answer.

| Now in the olden days of King Arthur, | The Wife begins with a brief prologue in which she insults friars (the Friar, another pilgrim, had just interrupted her). |
| Of whom the Britons speak with great honour, | Friars licensed to seek alms (charity) in a certain area |
| All this wide land was land of faery. | Bedrooms (What is the Wife implying here?) |
| The elf-queen, with her jolly company, | The Wife suggests that we no longer see faeries and elves because they have been chased away by friars' prayers. |
| Danced oftentimes on many a green mead; | This is sarcasm: The friars may have banished monsters like the incubus, but they are less than harmless themselves (see line 12 above). |
| This was the old opinion, as I read. | Here the Wife introduces the protagonist (a "lusty bachelor" and knight) and his lord, King Arthur (the only other man in the tale). |
| I speak of many hundred years ago; | |
| But now no man can see the elves, you know. | |
| For now the so-great charity and prayers | |
| Of limiters and other holy friars | |
| That do infest each land and every stream | |
| As thick as motes are in a bright sunbeam, | |
| Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies' bowers, | |
| Cities and towns and castles and high towers, | |
| Manors and barns and stables, aye and dairies- | |
| This causes it that there are now no fairies. | |
| For where was wont to walk full many an elf, | |
| Right there walks now the limiter himself | |
| In noons and afternoons and in mornings, | |
| Saying his matins and such holy things, | |
| As he goes round his district in his gown. | |
| Women may now go safely up and down, | |
| In every copse or under every tree; | |
| There is no other incubus, than he, | |
| And would do them nothing but dishonour. | |
| And so befell it that this King Arthur | |
| Had at his court a lusty bachelor | |
| Who, on a day, came riding from river; | |
| And happened that, alone as she was born, | |
| He saw a maiden walking through the corn, | |
| From whom, in spite of all she did and said, | |
| Straightway by force he took her maidenhead; | |
| For which violation was there such clamour, | |
| And such appealing unto King Arthur, | |
That soon condemned was this knight to be dead            35
By course of law, and should have lost his head,
**Peradventure**, such being the statute then;
But that the other ladies and the queen
So long prayed of the king to show him grace,
He granted life, at last, in the law's place,              40
And gave him to the queen, as she should will,
Whether she'd save him, or his blood should spill.
The queen she thanked the king with all her might,
And after this, thus spoke she to the knight,
When she'd an opportunity, one day:
"You stand yet," said she, "in such poor a way
That for your life you've no security.
I'll grant you life if you can tell to me
What thing it is that women most desire.
Be wise, and keep your neck from iron dire!
And if you cannot tell it me anon,
Then will I give you license to be gone
A twelvemonth and a day, to search and learn
Sufficient answer in this grave concern.
And your knight's word I'll have, **ere** forth you pace,    55
To yield your body to me in this place."

**This knight rapes a young maiden. He is sentenced to death.** (Peradventure means "perhaps.")

The queen and her ladies convince the king to spare the knight's life. (But why?) He agrees, and now the queen will decide his fate.

The queen will let him live if he can answer one question: **What is it that women most desire?** She gives him a year and a day to search for the answer.

Before

"The Wife of Bath's Tale," lines 51 – 126
The knight has no choice but to accept the queen's terms. He leaves the court in search of someone who can help him answer the question. He talks to many people, but no two people give him the same answer. Some say that women want to be flattered, some that they want sovereignty in marriage. Still others say they want to be trusted — the Wife digresses on this point, relating the story of Midas and his wife from the Roman writer Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*

Grieved was this knight, and sorrowfully he sighed;
But there! **he could not do as pleased his pride.**
And at the last he chose that he would wend
And come again upon the twelvemonth's end,            60
With such an answer as God might purvey;
And so he took his leave and went his way.
He sought out every house and every place
Wherein he hoped to find that he had grace
To learn what women love the most of all;
But nowhere ever did it him befall
To find, upon the question stated here,
Two, persons who agreed with statement clear.
Some said that women all loved best riches,
Some said, fair fame, and some said, prettiness;    70
Some, rich array, some said 'twas lust abed
And often to be widowed and re-wed.

How does this fit in with the Wife's point about a man's role in marriage?

The knight agrees to the queen's terms. He searches far and wide for someone who can tell him what women most desire, but no two people give him the same answer.
Some said that our poor hearts are aye most eased
When we have been most flattered and thus pleased
And he went near the truth, I will not lie;  75
A man may win us best with flattery;
And with attentions and with busyness
We're often limed, the greater and the less.
   And some say, too, that we do love the best
To be quite free to do our own behest,
And that no man reprove us for our vice,
But saying we are wise, take our advice.
For truly there is no one of us all,
If anyone shall rub us on a gall,
That will not kick because he tells the truth.  85
Try, and he'll find, who does so, I say sooth.
No matter how much vice we have within,
We would be held for wise and clean of sin.
   And some folk say that great delight have we
To be held constant, also trustworthy,
And on one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
And not betray a thing that men may tell.
But that tale is not worth a rake's handle;
By God, we women can no thing conceal,
As witness Midas. Would you hear the tale?  95
   Ovid, among some other matters small,
Said Midas had beneath his long curled hair,
Two ass's ears that grew in secret there,
The which defect he hid, as best he might,
Full cunningly from every person's sight,
And, save his wife, no one knew of it, no.
He loved her most, and trusted her also;
And he prayed of her that to no creature
She'd tell of his disfigurement impure.
   She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win
She would do no such villainy or sin
And cause her husband have so foul a name;
Nor would she tell it for her own deep shame.
Nevertheless, she thought she would have
Because so long the secret must she hide;
It seemed to swell so big about her heart
That some word from her mouth must surely start;
And since she dared to tell it to no man,
Down to a marsh, that lay hard by, she ran;
Till she came there her heart was all afire,
And as a bittern booms in the quagmire,  105
She laid her mouth low to the water down:
"Betray me not, you sounding water blown,"
Said she, "I tell it to none else but you:
The knight gets "near the truth" when he hears that
women most desire to be flattered; limed means "ensnared."
   Command
Here the knight learns that
women want sovereignty in marriage.
Truth
The knight learns that
some women would like to
be trusted with secrets, 
though the narrator suggests that this may not be warranted.
The Wife makes a
digression, relating the
tale of King Midas from
Ovid's Metamorphoses.
Given the preceding paragraph, this can't work out well for Midas.
Midas's wife promises not to reveal that he has donkey's ears.
However, the secret weighs heavily on her —
she must tell someone.
Marsh
Midas's wife tells her secret to the waters of the...
Long ears like asses' has my husband two!
Now is my heart at ease, since that is out;
I could no longer keep it, there's no doubt."
Here may you see, though for a while we bide,
Yet out it must; no secret can we hide.
The rest of all this tale, if you would hear,

Having made her point about women's inability to keep secrets, the Wife doesn't bother to finish the story (whispering reeds reveal Midas's secret).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long ears like asses' has my husband two!</th>
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| I could no longer keep it, there's no doubt."
| Here may you see, though for a while we bide, |
| Yet out it must; no secret can we hide. |
| The rest of all this tale, if you would hear, |

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<tr>
<th>&quot;The Wife of Bath's Tale,&quot; lines 127 – 166</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This knight my tale is chiefly told about</td>
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<tr>
<td>When what he went for he could not find out,</td>
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<tr>
<td>That is, the thing that women love the best,</td>
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<td>Most saddened was the spirit in his breast;</td>
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<tr>
<td>But home he goes, he could no more delay.</td>
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<td>The day was come when home he turned his way;</td>
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<td>And on his way it chanced that he should ride</td>
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<td>In all his care, beneath a forest's side,</td>
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<td>And there he saw, a-dancing him before,</td>
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<td>Full four and twenty ladies, maybe more;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toward which dance eagerly did he turn</td>
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<tr>
<td>In hope that there some wisdom he should learn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>But truly, ere he came upon them there,</td>
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<tr>
<td>The dancers vanished all, he knew not where.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No creature saw he that gave sign of life,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Save, on the greenward sitting, an old wife;</td>
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<tr>
<td>A fouler person could no man devise.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Before the knight this old wife did arise,</td>
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<td>And said: &quot;Sir knight, hence lies no travelled way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell me what thing you seek, and by your fay.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perchance you'll find it may the better be;</td>
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<tr>
<td>These ancient folk know many things,&quot; said she.</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Dear mother,&quot; said this knight assuredly,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am but dead, save I can tell, truly,</td>
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<tr>
<td>What thing it is that women most desire;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you inform me, I'd pay well your hire.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Plight me your troth here, hand in hand,&quot; said she,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;That you will do, whatever it may be,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The knight is dejected by his failure to find an answer to his question.

On his way back to the court, the knight spies many women dancing in a forest. He thinks they may be able to answer his question.

Grass-covered ground

When he approaches them, however, the women vanish. In their place he finds an old crone. She asks him what he seeks.

The knight explains his problem, and offers a reward for help.
"The Wife of Bath’s Tale," lines 167 – 216

They return to the court, and the knight is brought before an assembly of women. The queen asks for the answer to the question. The knight replies, "Women desire to have the sovereignty / As well upon their husband as their love, / And to have mastery their man above" (sovereignty means both "control" and "freedom"). None of the assembled women objects to this answer, and the knight wins back his life. At this point, the old woman reminds him of his promise (that he would do whatever she requested of him), then asks him to marry her. The knight objects, ungraciously, and offers money instead of marriage. The old woman rejects his offer, and the knight has no choice but to honor his promise.

When they were come unto the court, this knight
Said he had kept his promise as was right,
And ready was his answer, as he said.
Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,
And many a widow, since they are so wise,
The queen herself sitting as high justice,
Assembled were, his answer there to hear;
And then the knight was bidden to appear.
Command was given for silence in the hall,
And that the knight should tell before them all
What thing all worldly women love the best.
This knight did not stand dumb, as does a beast,
But to this question presently answered
With manly voice, so that the whole court heard:
“My liege lady, generally,” said he,
"Women desire to have the sovereignty
As well upon their husband as their love,
And to have mastery their man above;
This thing you most desire, though me you kill
Do as you please, I am here at your will."
In all the court there was no wife or maid
Or widow that denied the thing he said,
But all held, he was worthy to have life.
And with that word up started the old wife
"The Wife of Bath's Tale" lines 217 – 252

The man and the old woman are married, and they retire to the wedding bed. The old woman asks why the knight seems upset, and offers to make amends if the fault lies with her. He replies, again ungraciously, that she is too ugly, too old, too poor, and too low-born for him. The old woman criticizes him for his lack of respect, saying that these things could be fixed if only he would treat her well.

Now, peradventure, would some men say here,
That, of my negligence, I take no care To tell you of the joy and all the array That at the wedding feast were seen that day.  
Make a brief answer to this thing I shall; I say, there was no joy or feast at all; There was but heaviness and grievous sorrow; For privately he wedded on the morrow, And all day, then, he hid him like an owl; So sad he was, his old wife looked so foul.
Great was the woe the knight had in his thought When he, with her, to marriage bed was brought; He rolled about and turned him to and fro. His old wife lay there, always smiling so,

---

Whom he had seen a-sitting on the green. "Mercy," cried she, "my sovereign lady queen! Before the court's dismissed, give me my right. 'Twas I who taught the answer to this knight; For which he did plight troth to me, out there, That the first thing I should of him require He would do that, if it lay in his might. Before the court, now, pray I you, sir knight," Said she, "that you will take me for your wife; For well you know that I have saved your life. If this be false, say nay, upon your fay!" This knight replied: "Alas and welaway! That I so promised I will not protest. But for God's love pray make a new request. Take all my wealth and let my body go." "Nay then," said she, *beshrew* us if I do! For though I may be foul and old and poor, I will not, for all metal and all ore That from the earth is dug or lies above, Be aught except your wife and your true love." *My love?" cried he, "nay, rather my damnation! Alas! that any of my race and station Should ever so dishonoured fouly be!" But all for naught; the end was this, that he Was so constrained he needs must go and wed, And take his ancient wife and go to bed.

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<td>asks him to hold up his end of the bargain.</td>
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And said: "O my dear husband, ben'cite! 
Fares every knight with wife as you with me? 
Is this the custom in King Arthur's house? 
Are knights of his all so fastidious? 
I am your own true love and, more, your wife; 
And I am she who saved your very life; 
And truly, since I've never done you wrong, 
Why do you treat me so, this first night long? 
You act as does a man who's lost his wit; 
What is my fault? For God's love tell me it, 
And it shall be amended, if I may." 
"Amended!" cried this knight, "Alas, nay, nay!
You are so loathsome, and so old also,
And therewith of so low a race were born,
It's little wonder that I toss and turn.
Would God my heart would break within my breast!"
"Is this," asked she, "the cause of your unrest?"
"Yes, truly," said he, "and no wonder 'tis."
"Now, sir," said she, "I could amend all this,
If I but would, and that within days three, 
If you would bear yourself well towards me.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale," lines 253 – 320
Since the knight has chosen to treat the old woman so rudely, she takes it upon herself to educate him as to the meaning of gentility. Gentility means both the quality of being well-mannered and the condition of being born into nobility. The old woman says that the first meaning is not brought about by the second meaning; in other words, being born to nobility does not mean you are well mannered. Whether someone is a gentleman does not depend on who his family is, but how he acts. The old woman points out that, though she may be of low birth, she has the power to act virtuously.

"But since you speak of such gentility
As is descended from old wealth, till ye Claim that for that you should be gentlemen,
I hold such arrogance not worth a hen.
Find him who is most virtuous alway,
Alone or publicly, and most tries aye
To do whatever noble deeds he can,
And take him for the greatest gentleman.
Christ wills we claim from Him gentility,
Not from ancestors of landocracy.
For though they give us all their heritage,
For which we claim to be of high lineage,
Yet can they not bequeath, in anything,
To any of us, their virtuous living,

Bless me
At their marriage bed, the crone reminds the knight of his obligations to her as the one who saved his life and as his wife. She asks if she is at fault and offers to make amends.
This very unchivalrous knight explains that she is too ugly, too old, too poor, and too low-born for him.
She replies that these things may be fixed in three days if only he would treat her with kindness.
That made men say they had gentility,  
And bade us follow them in like degree.

"Well does that poet wise of great Florence,  
Called Dante, speak his mind in this sentence;"

Somewhat like this may it translated be:

'Rearely unto the branches of the tree  
Doth human worth mount up: and so ordains  
He Who bestows it; to Him it pertains.'

For of our fathers may we nothing claim  
But temporal things, that man may hurt and maim  
And everyone knows this as well as I,

If nobleness were implanted naturally  
Within a certain lineage, down the line,  
In private and in public, I opine,

The ways of gentleness they'd alway show  
And never fall to vice and conduct low.

"Take fire and carry it in the darkest house  
Between here and the Mount of Caucasus,  
And let men shut the doors and from them turn;"

Yet will the fire as fairly blaze and burn  
As twenty thousand men did it behold;  
Its nature and its office it will hold,  
On peril of my life, until it die.

From this you see that true gentility  
Is not allied to wealth a man may own,  
Since folk do not their deeds, as may be shown,  
As does the fire, according to its kind.  
For God knows that men may full often find  
A lord's son doing shame and villainy;  
And he that prizes his gentility  
In being born of some old noble house,  
With ancestors both noble and virtuous,  
But will himself do naught of noble deeds  
Nor follow him to whose name he succeeds,  
He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;

For acting churlish makes a man a churl.  
Gentility is not just the renown  
Of ancestors who have some greatness shown,  
In which you have no portion of your own.  
Your own gentility comes from God alone;  
Thence comes our true nobility by grace,  
It was not willed us with our rank and place  
Think how noble, as says Valerius,

Was that same Tullius Hostilius,  
Who out of poverty rose to high estate.  
Seneca and Boethius inculcate,

Expressly (and no doubt it thus proceeds),

Human worth comes not from one's ancestors but from God (a quote from the Italian writer Dante).

If nobility comes from one's ancestors, then their descendents will act nobly. (The knight's behavior has proven that this is not the case.)

The crone makes an analogy: If you locked a flame inside a house so that no one could see it, it would still burn until it died, just as it would if thousands of people were watching. In the same way, shameful deeds that are done in private and out of the sight of others are still shameful even though no one knows about them.

This summarizes the point the crone makes in her analogy.

Roman historian  
An early king of Rome  
Roman philosophers  
Inculcate expressly means
Annotated Reading

"The Wife of Bath's Tale"

British and World Literature

| That he is noble who does noble deeds; | "teach explicitly." / See line 302. |
| And therefore, husband dear, I thus conclude: | |
| Although my ancestors mayhap were rude, | The crone points out that, although she may be of low birth, she has the power to live virtuously. |
| Yet may the High Lord God, and so hope I, | |
| Grant me the grace to live right virtuously. | |
| Then I'll be gentle when I do begin | |
| To live in virtue and to do no sin. | |

| Having corrected the knight's understanding of gentility by effectively arguing that her low birth should not matter to him, the old woman addresses his criticism that she is poor. She points out that Christ chose to live in poverty, and that the respected Roman writers Seneca and Juvenal both valued poverty over the pursuit of wealth. Then she addresses his criticism that she is too old. She says that her age will protect her chastity, and that the knight should be happy to know she will never have an affair. |

| "And when you me reproach for poverty, | Next, the crone takes on the knight's criticism that she is too poor, noting that Christ chose to live in poverty. |
| The High God, in Whom we believe, say I, | |
| In voluntary poverty lived His life. | |
| And surely every man, or maid, or wife | Being |
| May understand that Jesus, Heaven's King, | |
| Would not have chosen wileness of living. | |
| Glad poverty's an honest thing, that's plain, | |
| Which Seneca and other clerks maintain. | |
| Whoso will be content with poverty, | |
| I hold him rich, though not a shirt has he. | |
| And he that covets much is a poor wight, | |
| For he would gain what's all beyond his might, | |
| But he that has not, nor desires to have, | |
| Is rich, although you hold him but a knave. | |
| True poverty, it sings right naturally; | |
| **Juvenal** gaily says of poverty: | |
| 'The poor man, when he walks along the way, | |
| Before the robbers he may sing and play.' | |
| Poverty's odious good, and, as I guess, | |
| It is a stimulant to busyness; | |
| A great improver, too, of **sapience** | |
| In him that takes it all with due patience. | |
| Poverty's this, though it seem misery- | |
| Its quality may none dispute, say I. | |
| **Poverty often, when a man is low,** | |
| **Makes him his God and even himself to know.** | |
| **And poverty's an eye-glass, seems to me,** | |
| **Through which a man his loyal friends may see.** | |
| Since you've received no injury from me, | |
| Then why reproach me for my poverty. | |

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"The Wife of Bath's Tale," lines 363 – 408

The old woman asks the knight to make a choice: He can take her as she is and have a loving, loyal wife, or have her be young and beautiful and risk that she be unfaithful. The knight allows her to make the choice for him, thereby giving her sovereignty over him. The crone points out that the knight will never have to worry that she will have an affair.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Now, sir, with age you have upbraided me; And truly, sir, though no authority Were in a book, you gentles of honour Say that men should the aged show favour, And call him father, of your gentleness; And authors could I find for this, I guess. Now since you say that I am foul and old, Then fear you not to be made a cuckold; For dirt and age, as prosperous I may be, Nevertheless, since I know your delight, I'll satisfy your worldly appetite.</th>
<th>Having dismissed his argument against her poverty, the crone addresses his complaint about her age. The crone points out that the knight will never have to worry that she will have an affair.</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Choose, now,&quot; said she, &quot;one of these two things, aye, To have me foul and old until I die, And be to you a true and humble wife, And never anger you in all my life; Or else to have me young and very fair And take your chance with those who will repair Unto your house, and all because of me, Or in some other place, as well may be. Now choose which you like better and reply.&quot; This knight considered, and did sorely sigh, But at the last replied as you shall hear: &quot;My lady and my love, and wife so dear, I put myself in your wise governing; Do you choose which may be the more pleasing, And bring most honour to you, and me also. I care not which it be of these things two; For if you like it, that suffices me.&quot;</td>
<td>The crone demands that he make a choice: He can take her as she is and have a loving, loyal wife, or have her be young and beautiful and risk that she be unfaithful. The knight gives the crone the power to make the decision for him — in other words, he gives her sovereignty over him. These lines represent the rhetorical point of the Wife's tale — that marriages work best when the woman is in charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?&quot; &quot;Yes, truly, wife,&quot; said he, &quot;I hold that best.&quot; &quot;Kiss me,&quot; said she, &quot;we'll be no longer wroth, For by my truth, to you I will be both; That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.</td>
<td>&quot;Then have I got of you the mastery, Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?&quot; &quot;Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?&quot; &quot;Yes, truly, wife,&quot; said he, &quot;I hold that best.&quot; &quot;Kiss me,&quot; said she, &quot;we'll be no longer wroth, For by my truth, to you I will be both; That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.</td>
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</table>
I pray God I go mad, and so declare,  
If I be not to you as good and true  
As ever wife was since the world was new.  
And, save I be, at dawn, as fairly seen  
As any lady, empress, or great queen  
That is between the east and the far west,  
Do with my life and death as you like best.  
Throw back the curtain and see how it is."

And when the knight saw verily all this,  
That she so very fair was, and young too,  
For joy he clasped her in his strong arms two,  
His heart bathed in a bath of utter bliss;  
A thousand times, all in a row, he'd kiss.  
And she obeyed his wish in everything  
That might give pleasure to his love-liking.  
And thus they lived unto their lives' fair end,  
In perfect joy; and **Jesus to us send**

**Meek husbands, and young ones, and fresh in bed,**  
**And good luck to outlive them that we wed.**  
**And I pray Jesus to cut short the lives**  
**Of those who'll not be governed by their wives;**  
**And old and querulous niggards with their pence,**  
**And send them soon a mortal pestilence!**

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The crone vows to be  "good and fair" — that is, faithful and physically attractive (the knight had been asked to choose one or the other). She then asks him to look at her.

The crone has transformed into a beautiful young woman. The knight is pleased.

In case you didn't get the Wife's point, she spells it out for you here.