

The Wife of Bath's Tale

U.G. Semester III

MJC – 04

Unit 1

Dr. Md. Shahnawaz Alam

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty)

P.G. Department of English

Maharaja College, Arrah

The Wife of Bath's Tale is a chivalric romance that explores themes of female power, justice, and transformation. Told by the bold and experienced Wife of Bath, the tale challenges medieval notions of gender roles and marriage dynamics.

The Knight's Crime and His Punishment

The story begins in the time of King Arthur, where a knight commits a grave crime—he assaults a young maiden. As punishment, he is brought before the court, and King Arthur sentences him to death. However, Queen Guinevere and her ladies intervene, offering the knight a chance to save his life. She gives him a year and a day to find the answer to a crucial question: What do women most desire?

The Knight's Search for an Answer

The knight sets off on his quest, traveling across the land and asking women what they desire most. He receives many conflicting answers—some say wealth, others say beauty, love, or loyalty—but none seem definitive. As the deadline approaches, he despairs of ever finding the correct answer.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

U.G. Semester III

MJC – 04

Unit 1

Dr. Md. Shahnawaz Alam

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty)

P.G. Department of English

Maharaja College, Arrah

The Old Woman's Bargain

At last, the knight encounters an old, ugly woman who offers him the answer he seeks what women most desire is sovereignty over their husbands and their own lives. However, she gives him this knowledge on one condition: he must agree to do whatever she asks in return. Desperate, the knight agrees.

The Knight's Answer and His Fate

The knight returns to Queen Guinevere's court and gives the correct answer. The queen and her court agree that he has fulfilled the challenge, and his life is spared. However, the old woman then makes her demand—she wants the knight to marry her. The knight is horrified but has no choice but to honor his promise.

The Transformation of the Old Woman

On their wedding night, the knight is miserable, unable to hide his disgust at his bride's age and appearance. Seeing his reluctance, the old woman offers him a choice:

The Wife of Bath's Tale

U.G. Semester III

MJC – 04

Unit 1

Dr. Md. Shahnawaz Alam

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty)

P.G. Department of English

Maharaja College, Arrah

1. She can remain old and ugly but be a faithful, devoted wife, or
2. She can become young and beautiful but may not remain loyal.

The knight, having learned his lesson, gives her the power to choose, granting her the sovereignty she desires. Pleased by his response, the old woman transforms into a young and beautiful wife who also promises to remain faithful to him. The knight is overjoyed, and the tale ends on a note of harmony and newfound respect for women's desires.

Conclusion

The Wife of Bath's Tale is a powerful critique of gender roles in medieval society, advocating for women's authority in marriage. It reinforces the idea that mutual respect and autonomy lead to happiness in relationships. By telling a story where a woman's wisdom and sovereignty bring about transformation, the Wife of Bath challenges traditional notions of male dominance and asserts her own views on love and marriage.