

# [The analysis of the wife of bath](https://assignbuster.com/the-analysis-of-the-wife-of-bath/)

The Wife of Bath is often considered an early feminist, but by reading her prologue and tale one can easily see that this is not true. In Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, the Wife of Bath believes that a wife ought to have authority and control over her husband. The Wife’s ideas were indisputably uncommon for her time period and she shocked her audience with her radical opinions, but perhaps that was her intention. One should also note that the Wife of Bath did possess weaknesses towards men despite her air of confidence, and it is likely that her outspokenness is a sort of defense mechanism. Since feminism traditionally denotes a belief in equality between the sexes, it is easy to see that the Wife doesn’t support feminism but instead the manipulation of men for her own benefit.

Both the Wife of Bath’s prologue and tale illustrate her belief that men should allow themselves to “ be ruled by their wives” (176) and the Wife, or Dame Alice, repeatedly emphasizes that she has no problem physically and psychologically abusing her husbands. The wife’s first three husbands were old and rich, simple tools. Her fourth husband was like the wife’s male counterpart – promiscuous and stubborn as well – but he did died quickly. The wife was unfazed by her fourth husband’s death and already had a fifth husband lined up. Her fifth husband was the cruelest and most difficult for her to tame, and ironically her favorite of them all. Of course, she eventually had her way with all of them. A widow five times over, the wife openly admits that she “ put [her husbands] to work in such a fashion” (157) that they cried out in exhaustion and frustration. She also boasts about her skill in manipulating her past husbands, especially the old, rich ones. The Wife would tell lies to her husbands, making them think that she had heard gossip about an unfaithful act they committed, when in fact she was only trying to “ put them in the wrong” (157). After making him feel thoroughly guilty, she could then sleep around without fear of interrogation from her husband.

It is likely that a great deal of the Wife’s apparent impudence is only an attempt to jar her audience. Before the Wife of Bath begins her tale, the Friar claims that he hopes “ to have joy and salvation” (168) from the story she will tell and, as if in protest, the Wife begins by making fun of friars. Dame Alice sets the scene by describing a land that used to be inhabited by fairies, but is now filled with friars that “ can only do a [woman] physical dishonor” (170). When, in her prologue, the Wife claims that her fifth husband was much happier once she “ had gained the upper hand” (168), the reader must wonder how much of her advice is exaggeration or lies.

Over all, the Wife of Bath gives the impression of being a strong and often audacious woman, but Chaucer does not portray her without a weakness. In her prologue, the Wife sorrowfully acknowledges that “ age, alas, which poisons everything, has robbed [her]” (162) of her beauty and youthfulness. This, of course, does not stop her from marrying again and again – she even marries a twenty-year-old at the age of forty. Ultimately, the Wife of Bath is trying to mask her insecurity concerning her failing beauty, which has been her primary means of controlling men and thus of having a power in society normally not enjoyed by women.

The Wife of Bath’s tale illustrates her desire for youth as well. The tale is suggestive of a fairy tale, but doesn’t properly follow a fairy tale format. Her tale features a young man that is imprisoned for rape. The fact that the protagonist is a rapist is reminiscent of the Wife’s abusive, younger husbands. The knight is ordered by the queen to discover what it is that women want most, but he cannot find out. Fortunately – or perhaps unfortunately – he finds an old woman in a clearing that promises to tell him the answer if he will do the next thing she requests of him. Wanting to save his own life, he agrees but then is obligated to marry the ugly old woman when she asks it of him. The old woman has magical powers and asks the young knight if he would prefer a beautiful, promiscuous wife or an ugly, faithful wife. When he answers that “ whatever [she] likes suits [him]” (176) best, she is magically transformed into a beautiful, young girl. This clearly illustrates the wife’s idea that everything will turn out for the best if the woman is given power instead of the man in a marriage. The transformation also exposes the Wife’s longing to have her youth restored just as the old lady in the story did.

Readers must take the Wife of Bath with her strengths and her weaknesses. Unlike most of the characters in The Canterbury Tales, the Wife is neither satirized nor idealized – she is simply created to engage and intrigue readers. Her character traits are extreme, and it is even hard to tell what Chaucer’s view of the Wife is. She is written as a headstrong and opinionated woman, but her failing beauty and cruelty towards men indicates that she was by no means an idealized character. Though unfair towards men, the Wife of Bath knows how to push people’s buttons and get what she wants.