

BATH TIME  
A Canterbury Tale

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A Play in One Act

by

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Cast of Characters

<u>Chaucer:</u>	A poet with writer's block.
<u>Harry Bailey:</u>	Host at the Tabard Inn.
<u>Wife of Bath:</u>	A wise lady.
<u>Knight:</u>	A figure from the shadows.
<u>King Arthur:</u>	A figure from the shadows.
<u>Queen Guinevere/Woman #1:</u>	Figures from the shadows.
<u>Hag/Woman #2:</u>	Figures from the shadows.

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SETTING: The main room of the Tabard Inn, with a long table, benches, and stools placed around the room. Rushes cover the ground, and candles provide the lighting.

AT RISE: CHAUCER is seated at the table, a pile of parchment in front of him, along with an inkwell and a pen. SHADOWY FIGURES sit on the stools. CHAUCER is writing, while HARRY, the innkeeper, is sweeping the rushes on the ground. The sound of rain is heard in the background.

CHAUCER

(Throwing his pen down in disgust, he crumples up the paper he'd been writing on and throws it across the room. To HARRY.)

I give up! What is my problem? Why can't I shove a few words around, make them rhyme, throw in some local color, and come up with an interconnected set of stories written in the under-appreciated English vernacular, told by a picturesque assemblage of characters representing the entire gamut of medieval English society, as they go on a journey together to someplace for some reason that I just can't seem to figure out. I swear I'd sell my soul for just one good idea. Or just one good rhyme.

(Suddenly, a gust of wind blows the door open, and the WIFE OF BATH charges into the room, spraying rain water everywhere.)

WIFE OF BATH

Holy Mother of God! It's raining cats, bats, and rats out there. I'd rather stay in here and wet my whistle.

(To HARRY.)

Got some meat without any gristle?

HARRY

Sorry, lady, we're all out of the prime cuts.

CHAUCER

(To the audience.)

Cats, bats, rats . . . whistle, gristle . . . This could be the answer to my prayer.

(To WIFE.)

Who are you, Mistress, and how came you here?

WIFE OF BATH

When April's leaden sky is streaming tears,  
 Repentance for the sins of reckless years  
 Demands heartfelt atonement for what's owed,  
 And made of me a pilgrim on the road.  
 Plain English? When the heavens start to drip,  
 Good sinners know it's time to take a trip.  
 From this, the Tabard Inn, I'll make my start,  
 To Canterbury, with a pious heart.  
 The holy, blessed martyr do I seek,  
 Thomas a Becket, defender of the weak.  
 I'm the big, bad, bosomy Wife of Bath,  
 Going to take you down that primrose path!  
 Because, you know, five husbands have I had,  
 Three of them were good and two were bad.  
 The good were rich, but better still were old,  
 I loved them all to death, then took their gold.

HARRY

Sounds like a pig in a poke to me.

WIFE OF BATH

And what's wrong with that? It's in the Bible. If five husbands were good enough for the Samaritan woman, they're good enough for me. Not the same five, of course, there's plenty of soft-headed fopdoodles to go around, and even though Jesus rebuked her for it – Mrs. Samaritan, that is – all He actually said was, "You've had five husbands," which simply proves that He could count. Look at it this way – if God wanted everyone to be a virgin, where would all the new virgins come from?

It's true they would pay or my love I'd withhold,  
 In this wicked world, we are all bought and sold.  
 Wanton in youth and much worse now I'm aged,  
 I'm a lioness still and refuse to be caged.  
 In my youth I was fair, always good for a laugh,  
 Though my kernel's now dry, you can still eat my chaff.  
 Dance while you're young and make love though you're old,  
 There's fun to be had if you're not dead and cold.

And to prove my point, let me tell you a tale . . .

CHAUCER

(To the audience, as he  
eagerly dips his pen into the  
inkwell and gets ready to  
write. As the tale  
progresses, he writes it all  
down.)

A tale – that's it, that's exactly what I need!

WIFE OF BATH

In days of old, when Arthur was the king,  
When fairies through the groves would dance and sing,  
And blessing give to all the birds and beasts –  
The fairies now are gone, replaced by priests –  
When, as I say, the world was young and clean,  
And elves and pixies frolicked on the green,  
A lusty knight rode through a darkling wood,  
Spied a damsel, took her maidenhood,  
And rode away without another thought.  
So heinous was his crime, he soon was caught,

(The KNIGHT, KING ARTHUR, and  
QUEEN GUINEVERE come forward  
from the shadows.)

WIFE OF BATH

And brought before his sovereign liege and lord,  
Who doomed him to the executioner's sword.

KING ARTHUR

And consider yourself lucky it's only your head being chopped  
off.

WIFE OF BATH

But Guinevere, the queen, for mercy pled –  
You can't repent your sin if you are dead.

QUEEN GUINEVERE

(To KING ARTHUR.)

How about if I give him a quest instead, designed to teach him a  
lesson and make him realize the full horror of his crime?

KING ARTHUR

Whatever you say, dear.

QUEEN GUINEVERE

(To the KNIGHT.)

Then, Sir Knight, here is your quest. I charge you to travel the length and breadth of the kingdom to learn the answer to one simple question: What do women desire most? I give you a year and a day, and at the end of that time, you will return and give me the answer. If it's the right one, you live. If it's the wrong one, you die. Do you accept this challenge, or would you rather take the easy way out and be butchered on the spot?

KNIGHT

I don't suppose there's a third option?

KING ARTHUR

Choose!

KNIGHT

(Sighing despondently.)

Anybody see where I put my horse?

(KING ARTHUR fades into the shadows, QUEEN GUINEVERE removes her crown to become WOMAN #1, and WOMAN #2 comes forward to join her.)

WIFE OF BATH

And so the Knight set out upon his quest,  
To learn the thing that women like the best.  
His hopes were high he'd made the better choice,  
But every woman had a different voice.

WOMAN #1

Riches!

WOMAN #2

Honor!

WOMAN #1

Beauty!

WOMAN #2

Clean clothes!

WOMAN #1

Marriage!



KNIGHT

No, that's what I need to learn, what do women desire most?

HAG

That's it? That's what the queen sent you to discover?

KNIGHT

Well, she was thinking on her feet.

HAG

Piece of cake.

KNIGHT

All right, you've got yourself a deal.

(The HAG whispers something  
in the KNIGHT'S ear.)

WIFE OF BATH

And so they rode together to the court  
To give the answer, which was sweet and short.

(KING ARTHUR and QUEEN  
GUINEVERE come forward from  
the shadows. The KNIGHT and  
HAG kneel before them.)

KNIGHT

In a word, my lady, what women desire most is sovereignty. Women  
want to be in control – over husbands, lovers, chattel, and,  
most of all, over their own destinies.

QUEEN GUINEVERE

(To KING ARTHUR.)

What do you think, honey? Is that the correct answer?

KING ARTHUR

Yes, dear.

QUEEN GUINEVERE

All right, Sir Knight, you're off the hook. Now go and live a  
blameless life, and let all men follow your example.

HAG

Hold on a minute! We had a deal. I'm the one who gave him the  
answer, and, in return, he swore to give me whatever I asked of  
him. So, here's what I'm asking:

HAG (CONT.)

(To the KNIGHT.)

Marry me, and may we never be parted, not even if I reek like a rancid pigsty and my nose rots off from the stinking flux.

WIFE OF BATH

What could he do? The hag had saved his life,  
And so he took her for his lawful wife.  
But bed her he could not – 'twas shame past bearing.  
He saw his noble line besmirched, declaring:

KNIGHT

Take my riches and all that I possess, but don't defile my body.

HAG

Well, well, well. Now we know how that poor damsel you dishonored in the woods felt, don't we?

KNIGHT

I freely confess my wrong and swear to be a better man in future. I've given you my name, but giving you my love is more than I can stomach.

HAG

I take it that's because I'm an ugly, loathsome, low-class, repulsive old gargoye?

KNIGHT

In a manner of speaking.

HAG

And you'd rather have a lovely, high-born beauteous young maiden as your bride?

KNIGHT

It's a tough choice, but yes.

HAG

So, which would you prefer me to be: a hideous wreck who's long in the tooth and poor in worldly goods but true of heart and rich in virtue, or a frolicksome young filly, fair of face and charming, who brings studs home to dinner on a regular basis, invites them into the marriage bed, and makes you sleep in the barn?

KNIGHT

I don't suppose there's a third option?

HAG

Choose!

KNIGHT

Between a rock and a hard place? Sounds painful either way. I'll leave it up to you. You choose whatever brings pleasure to you and honor to us both, and I will be content.

HAG

In other words, you're saying that I'm the master in this marriage and can rule the roost as I see fit?

KNIGHT

Yes, dear.

HAG

Then give me a kiss and let this be the end of all our quarrels.

WIFE OF BATH

And with his lesson learned, the chastened knight  
 Did kiss her and beheld a wondrous sight!  
 A hag no more, the woman in his arms  
 Had turned into a damsel, full of charms,  
 Fine graces, youth, and dazzling beauty, too.  
 And o'er the years, she stayed both good and true,  
 Two wives in one, the best of age and youth,  
 Of outer loveliness and inner truth.  
 In perfect peace and joy, in sweet delight,  
 They lived and died, the lady and her knight.

(The KNIGHT and HAG fade into  
 the shadows, leaving CHAUCER  
 scribbling furiously and  
 HARRY gazing at them slack-  
 jawed.)

WIFE OF BATH

The truth he'd learned his death cannot efface –  
 That virtue comes when God grants us His grace,  
 That riches of the heart are all one needs,  
 That nobility is born of noble deeds.  
 And may the Lord in heaven up above  
 Send us husbands who deserve our love,  
 Obedient and young and fresh in bed,  
 And may we women outlive those we wed.

CHAUCER

(Putting a triumphant period  
on the parchment.)

The end!

WIFE OF BATH

(Heading for the door.)

Not quite. I still have a long way to go and, I'm happy to say,  
a hell of a lot to atone for.

CHAUCER

(Gathering up his materials  
and going after her.)

Wait – let me come with you! I bet you have plenty more stories  
up your sleeve.

WIFE OF BATH

No, that's it for me. But I do have plenty of friends waiting  
for me to meet up with them. Why don't you join us. I'm sick to  
death of their stories, and I'm sure they'd be glad of a new  
audience. Just tell them you're the father of English literature  
or something equally far-fetched, and that on the off-chance the  
holy martyr won't grant them immortal life, the tales they tell  
you will.

(As she and CHAUCER exit.)

Let's see now, there's the Miller, the Reeve, the Ploughman, the  
Franklin, the Friar, the Shipman, the Cook, the Doctor, the  
Merchant, a couple of nuns . . .

THE END