***Wife of Bath’s Prologue and* Tale: Summary of Key Sections**

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| *Prologue*  1-61  62-162  163-193  194- 235  236- 378  379- 452  453 – 502  502- 626  627 – 787  788 – 828  829-856  *Tale*  857-881  882-918  919-988  989-1045  1046-1108  1108-1212  1213-1264 | Mixes together details of her own marriage with arguments from Biblical ‘auctoritee’.  Moves on to a discussion of chastity, again invoking and manipulating the Bible in order to make her point.  The Pardoner’s interruption and the Wife’s assertiveness with him in resuming her life story.  She describes how of her five husbands the first three were old and good and the latter two were younger and bad.  The wife re-enacts her domestic life with her first three husbands – conflating the husbands and reporting their dialogue throughout.  The wife resumes her description of how she controlled and manipulated her earlier husbands.  The wife introduces her fourth husband, who she describes as a “revelour’ while describing how she herself actually behaved in the same way while making her husband’s life miserable.  After starting to talk about her fifth husband Jankyn, the wife digresses to talk more about her desires and the tricks she played to get them met. She ends this section by describing her fourth husband’s funeral and looking at Jankyn’s legs as she follows the coffin.  Marriage to Jankyn soon becomes a terrible trial and in this section she reports a wide selection of examples from ‘auctoritee’ that Jankyn reads out from his ‘Book of Wicked Wives’.  The wife loses patience and she and Jankyn argue violently before she pretends to be dead and Jankyn is finally made to submit to her.  The *Prologue* ends with the Friar interrupting and then the Friar and the Somonour having a violent argument before the Wife proceeds with her *Tale*.  A fairytale world of the old days of king Arthur is evoked.  A knight from Arthur’s court rapes a maiden and he is tried by the “queen and other ladies” who will spare his life if he can find out what women want.  The knight wanders through the land asking the question and getting a range of different response – including the story of Midas’ wife who couldn’t keep a secret.  The knight walks dejectedly back to the court but, after seeing twenty-four maidens dancing in a forest, he meets an old hag who tells him his life his safe, whereupon he returns to the court, gives the correct answer (that women want “maistrie” and sovereignty over their husbands) and his life is saved.  The hag claims the knight’s hand in marriage as recompense for saving his life. He is forced to agree but, in his shame and disgust, abuses the hag’s poverty, social inferiority and physical ugliness.  The hag delivers her sermon on ‘gentillesse’, stressing how this is dependent on kind and gentle actions and not on inherited ‘gentility’.  The hag asks the knight if he would like an old, ugly but faithful wife or an attractive wife, though he won’t ever know if she is being faithful. Having learnt to respect the hag through the wisdom of her sermon he hands over ‘maistrie’ to her and says she can choose. She responds by transforming herself into a beautiful woman who will be “both fair and good”. Thus both seem to get what they want. |