

Module 3: Exploring Good, Evil, and Noble Sacrifice
Topic 3 Content: "The Wife of Bath's Tale" of *The Canterbury Tales*
by Geoffrey Chaucer

1 Now in the olden days of King Arthur,
2 Of whom the Britons speak with great honour,
3 All this wide land was land of faery.
4 The elf-queen, with her jolly company,
5 Danced oftentimes on many a green mead;
6 This was the old opinion, as I read.
7 I speak of many hundred years ago;
8 But now no man can see the elves, you know.
9 For now the so-great charity and prayers
10 Of limiters and other holy friars
11 That do infest each land and every stream
12 As thick as motes are in a bright sunbeam,
13 Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies' bowers,
14 Cities and towns and castles and high towers,
15 Manors and barns and stables, aye and dairies—
16 This causes it that there are now no fairies.
17 For where was wont to walk full many an elf,
18 Right there walks now the limiter himself
19 In noons and afternoons and in mornings,
20 Saying his matins and such holy things,
21 As he goes round his district in his gown.
22 Women may now go safely up and down,
23 In every copse or under every tree;
24 There is no other incubus, than he,
25 And would do them nothing but dishonour.
26 And so befell it that this King Arthur
27 Had at his court a lusty bachelor
28 Who, on a day, came riding from river;
29 And happened that, alone as she was born,
30 He saw a maiden walking through the corn,
31 From whom, in spite of all she did and said,
32 Straightway by force he took her maidenhead;
33 For which violation was there such clamour,
34 And such appealing unto King Arthur,
35 That soon condemned was this knight to be dead
36 By course of law, and should have lost his head,
37 Peradventure, such being the statute then;
38 But that the other ladies and the queen
39 So long prayed of the king to show him grace,
40 He granted life, at last, in the law's place,
41 And gave him to the queen, as she should will,
42 Whether she'd save him, or his blood should spill.

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43 The queen she thanked the king with all her might,
44 And after this, thus spoke she to the knight,
45 When she'd an opportunity, one day:
46 You stand yet, said she, in such poor a way
47 That for your life you've no security.
48 I'll grant you life if you can tell to me
49 What thing it is that women most desire.
50 Be wise, and keep your neck from iron dire!
51 And if you cannot tell it me anon,
52 Then will I give you license to be gone
53 A twelvemonth and a day, to search and learn
54 Sufficient answer in this grave concern.
55 And your knight's word I'll have, ere forth you pace,
56 To yield your body to me in this place.
57 Grieved was this knight, and sorrowfully he sighed;
58 But there! he could not do as pleased his pride.
59 And at the last he chose that he would wend
60 And come again upon the twelvemonth's end,
61 With such an answer as God might purvey;
62 And so he took his leave and went his way.
63 He sought out every house and every place
64 Wherein he hoped to find that he had grace
65 To learn what women love the most of all;
66 But nowhere ever did it him befall
67 To find, upon the question stated here,
68 Two, persons who agreed with statement clear.
69 Some said that women all loved best riches,
70 Some said, fair fame, and some said, prettiness;
71 Some, rich array, some said 'twas lust abed
72 And often to be widowed and re-wed.
73 Some said that our poor hearts are aye most eased
74 When we have been most flattered and thus pleased
75 And he went near the truth, I will not lie;
76 A man may win us best with flattery;
77 And with attentions and with busyness
78 We're often lured, the greater and the less.
79 And some say, too, that we do love the best
80 To be quite free to do our own behest,
81 And that no man reprove us for our vice,
82 But saying we are wise, take our advice.
83 For truly there is no one of us all,
84 If anyone shall rub us on a gall,

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85 That will not kick because he tells the truth.
86 Try, and he'll find, who does so, I say sooth.
87 No matter how much vice we have within,
88 We would be held for wise and clean of sin.
89 And some folk say that great delight have we
90 To be held constant, also trustworthy,
91 And on one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
92 And not betray a thing that men may tell.
93 But that tale is not worth a rake's handle;
94 By God, we women can no thing conceal,
95 As witness Midas. Would you hear the tale?
96 Ovid, among some other matters small,
97 Said Midas had beneath his long curled hair,
98 Two ass's ears that grew in secret there,
99 The which defect he hid, as best he might,
100 Full cunningly from every person's sight,
101 And, save his wife, no one knew of it, no.
102 He loved her most, and trusted her also;
103 And he prayed of her that to no creature
104 She'd tell of his disfigurement impure.
105 She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win
106 She would do no such villainy or sin
107 And cause her husband have so foul a name;
108 Nor would she tell it for her own deep shame.
109 Nevertheless, she thought she would have died
110 Because so long the secret must she hide;
111 It seemed to swell so big about her heart
112 That some word from her mouth must surely start;
113 And since she dared to tell it to no man,
114 Down to a marsh, that lay hard by, she ran;
115 Till she came there her heart was all afire,
116 And as a bittern booms in the quagmire,
117 She laid her mouth low to the water down:
118 Betray me not, you sounding water blown,
119 Said she, I tell it to none else but you:
120 Long ears like asses' has my husband two!
121 Now is my heart at ease, since that is out;
122 I could no longer keep it, there's no doubt.
123 Here may you see, though for a while we bide,
124 Yet out it must; no secret can we hide.
125 The rest of all this tale, if you would hear,
126 Read Ovid: in his book does it appear.

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127 This knight my tale is chiefly told about
128 When what he went for he could not find out,
129 That is, the thing that women love the best,
130 Most saddened was the spirit in his breast;
131 But home he goes, he could no more delay.
132 The day was come when home he turned his way;
133 And on his way it chanced that he should ride
134 In all his care, beneath a forest's side,
135 And there he saw, a-dancing him before,
136 Full four and twenty ladies, maybe more;
137 Toward which dance eagerly did he turn
138 In hope that there some wisdom he should learn.
139 But truly, ere he came upon them there,
140 The dancers vanished all, he knew not where.
141 No creature saw he that gave sign of life,
142 Save, on the greensward sitting, an old wife;
143 A fouler person could no man devise.
144 Before the knight this old wife did arise,
145 And said: Sir knight, hence lies no travelled way.
146 Tell me what thing you seek, and by your fay.
147 Perchance you'll find it may the better be;
148 These ancient folk know many things, said she.
149 Dear mother, said this knight assuredly,
150 I am but dead, save I can tell, truly,
151 What thing it is that women most desire;
152 Could you inform me, I'd pay well your hire.
153 Plight me your troth here, hand in hand, said she,
154 That you will do, whatever it may be,
155 The thing I ask if it lie in your might;
156 And I'll give you your answer ere the night.
157 Have here my word, said he. That thing I grant.
158 Then, said the crone, of this I make my vaunt,
159 Your life is safe; and I will stand thereby,
160 Upon my life, the queen will say as I.
161 Let's see which is the proudest of them all
162 That wears upon her hair kerchief or caul,
163 Shall dare say no to that which I shall teach;
164 Let us go now and without longer speech.
165 Then whispered she a sentence in his ear,
166 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.
167 When they were come unto the court, this knight
168 Said he had kept his promise as was right,

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169 And ready was his answer, as he said.
170 Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,
171 And many a widow, since they are so wise,
172 The queen herself sitting as high justice,
173 Assembled were, his answer there to hear;
174 And then the knight was bidden to appear.
175 Command was given for silence in the hall,
176 And that the knight should tell before them all
177 What thing all worldly women love the best.
178 This knight did not stand dumb, as does a beast,
179 But to this question presently answered
180 With manly voice, so that the whole court heard:
181 My liege lady, generally, said he,
182 Women desire to have the sovereignty
183 As well upon their husband as their love,
184 And to have mastery their man above;
185 This thing you most desire, though me you kill
186 Do as you please, I am here at your will.
187 In all the court there was no wife or maid
188 Or widow that denied the thing he said,
189 But all held, he was worthy to have life.
190 And with that word up started the old wife
191 Whom he had seen a-sitting on the green.
192 Mercy, cried she, my sovereign lady queen!
193 Before the court's dismissed, give me my right.
194 'Twas I who taught the answer to this knight;
195 For which he did plight troth to me, out there,
196 That the first thing I should of him require
197 He would do that, if it lay in his might.
198 Before the court, now, pray I you, sir knight,
199 Said she, that you will take me for your wife;
200 For well you know that I have saved your life.
201 If this be false, say nay, upon your fay!
202 This knight replied: Alas and welaway!
203 That I so promised I will not protest.
204 But for God's love pray make a new request.
205 Take all my wealth and let my body go.
206 Nay then, said she, beshrew us if I do!
207 For though I may be foul and old and poor,
208 I will not, for all metal and all ore
209 That from the earth is dug or lies above,
210 Be aught except your wife and your true love.

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211 My love? cried he, nay, rather my damnation!
212 Alas! that any of my race and station
213 Should ever so dishonoured foully be!
214 But all for naught; the end was this, that he
215 Was so constrained he needs must go and wed,
216 And take his ancient wife and go to bed.
217 Now, peradventure, would some men say here,
218 That, of my negligence, I take no care
219 To tell you of the joy and all the array
220 That at the wedding feast were seen that day.
221 Make a brief answer to this thing I shall;
222 I say, there was no joy or feast at all;
223 There was but heaviness and grievous sorrow;
224 For privately he wedded on the morrow,
225 And all day, then, he hid him like an owl;
226 So sad he was, his old wife looked so foul.
227 Great was the woe the knight had in his thought
228 When he, with her, to marriage bed was brought;
229 He rolled about and turned him to and fro.
230 His old wife lay there, always smiling so,
231 And said: O my dear husband, ben'cite!
232 Fares every knight with wife as you with me?
233 Is this the custom in King Arthur's house?
234 Are knights of his all so fastidious?
235 I am your own true love and, more, your wife;
236 And I am she who saved your very life;
237 And truly, since I've never done you wrong,
238 Why do you treat me so, this first night long?
239 You act as does a man who's lost his wit;
240 What is my fault? For God's love tell me it,
241 And it shall be amended, if I may.
242 Amended! cried this knight, Alas, nay, nay!
243 It will not be amended ever, no!
244 You are so loathsome, and so old also,
245 And therewith of so low a race were born,
246 It's little wonder that I toss and turn.
247 Would God my heart would break within my breast!
248 Is this, asked she, the cause of your unrest?
249 Yes, truly, said he, and no wonder 'tis.
250 Now, sir, said she, I could amend all this,
251 If I but would, and that within days three,
252 If you would bear yourself well towards me.

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253 But since you speak of such gentility
254 As is descended from old wealth, till ye
255 Claim that for that you should be gentlemen,
256 I hold such arrogance not worth a hen.
257 Find him who is most virtuous alway,
258 Alone or publicly, and most tries aye
259 To do whatever noble deeds he can,
260 And take him for the greatest gentleman.
261 Christ wills we claim from Him gentility,
262 Not from ancestors of landocracy.
263 For though they give us all their heritage,
264 For which we claim to be of high lineage,
265 Yet can they not bequeath, in anything,
266 To any of us, their virtuous living,
267 That made men say they had gentility,
268 And bade us follow them in like degree.
269 Well does that poet wise of great Florence,
270 Called Dante, speak his mind in this sentence;
271 Somewhat like this may it translated be:
272 'Rarely unto the branches of the tree
273 Doth human worth mount up: and so ordains
274 He Who bestows it; to Him it pertains.'
275 For of our fathers may we nothing claim
276 But temporal things, that man may hurt and maim
277 And everyone knows this as well as I,
278 If nobleness were implanted naturally
279 Within a certain lineage, down the line,
280 In private and in public, I opine,
281 The ways of gentleness they'd alway show
282 And never fall to vice and conduct low.
283 Take fire and carry it in the darkest house
284 Between here and the Mount of Caucasus,
285 And let men shut the doors and from them turn;
286 Yet will the fire as fairly blaze and burn
287 As twenty thousand men did it behold;
288 Its nature and its office it will hold,
289 On peril of my life, until it die.
290 From this you see that true gentility
291 Is not allied to wealth a man may own,
292 Since folk do not their deeds, as may be shown,
293 As does the fire, according to its kind.
294 For God knows that men may full often find

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295 A lord's son doing shame and villainy;
296 And he that prizes his gentility
297 In being born of some old noble house,
298 With ancestors both noble and virtuous,
299 But will himself do naught of noble deeds
300 Nor follow him to whose name he succeeds,
301 He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
302 For acting churlish makes a man a churl.
303 Gentility is not just the renown
304 Of ancestors who have some greatness shown,
305 In which you have no portion of your own.
306 Your own gentility comes from God alone;
307 Thence comes our true nobility by grace,
308 It was not willed us with our rank and place
309 Think how noble, as says Valerius,
310 Was that same Tullius Hostilius,
311 Who out of poverty rose to high estate.
312 Seneca and Boethius inculcate,
313 Expressly (and no doubt it thus proceeds),
314 That he is noble who does noble deeds;
315 And therefore, husband dear, I thus conclude:
316 Although my ancestors mayhap were rude,
317 Yet may the High Lord God, and so hope I,
318 Grant me the grace to live right virtuously.
319 Then I'll be gentle when I do begin
320 To live in virtue and to do no sin.
321 And when you me reproach for poverty,
322 The High God, in Whom we believe, say I,
323 In voluntary poverty lived His life.
324 And surely every man, or maid, or wife
325 May understand that Jesus, Heaven's King,
326 Would not have chosen vileness of living.
327 Glad poverty's an honest thing, that's plain,
328 Which Seneca and other clerks maintain.
329 Whoso will be content with poverty,
330 I hold him rich, though not a shirt has he.
331 And he that covets much is a poor wight,
332 For he would gain what's all beyond his might,
333 But he that has not, nor desires to have,
334 Is rich, although you hold him but a knave.
335 True poverty, it sings right naturally;
336 Juvenal gaily says of poverty:

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337 'The poor man, when he walks along the way,
338 Before the robbers he may sing and play.'
339 Poverty's odious good, and, as I guess,
340 It is a stimulant to busyness;
341 A great improver, too, of sapience
342 In him that takes it all with due patience.
343 Poverty's this, though it seem misery—
344 Its quality may none dispute, say I.
345 Poverty often, when a man is low,
346 Makes him his God and even himself to know.
347 And poverty's an eye-glass, seems to me,
348 Through which a man his loyal friends may see.
349 Since you've received no injury from me,
350 Then why reproach me for my poverty.
351 Now, sir, with age you have upbraided me;
352 And truly, sir, though no authority
353 Were in a book, you gentles of honour
354 Say that men should the aged show favour,
355 And call him father, of your gentleness;
356 And authors could I find for this, I guess.
357 Now since you say that I am foul and old,
358 Then fear you not to be made a cuckold;
359 For dirt and age, as prosperous I may be,
360 Are mighty wardens over chastity.
361 Nevertheless, since I know your delight,
362 I'll satisfy your worldly appetite.
363 Choose, now, said she, one of these two things, aye,
364 To have me foul and old until I die,
365 And be to you a true and humble wife,
366 And never anger you in all my life;
367 Or else to have me young and very fair
368 And take your chance with those who will repair
369 Unto your house, and all because of me,
370 Or in some other place, as well may be.
371 Now choose which you like better and reply.
372 This knight considered, and did sorely sigh,
373 But at the last replied as you shall hear:
374 My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
375 I put myself in your wise governing;
376 Do you choose which may be the more pleasing,
377 And bring most honour to you, and me also.
378 I care not which it be of these things two;

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379 For if you like it, that suffices me.
380 Then have I got of you the mastery,
381 Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?
382 Yes, truly, wife, said he, I hold that best.
383 Kiss me, said she, we'll be no longer wroth,
384 For by my truth, to you I will be both;
385 That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.
386 I pray God I go mad, and so declare,
387 If I be not to you as good and true
388 As ever wife was since the world was new.
389 And, save I be, at dawn, as fairly seen
390 As any lady, empress, or great queen
391 That is between the east and the far west,
392 Do with my life and death as you like best.
393 Throw back the curtain and see how it is.
394 And when the knight saw verily all this,
395 That she so very fair was, and young too,
396 For joy he clasped her in his strong arms two,
397 His heart bathed in a bath of utter bliss;
398 A thousand times, all in a row, he'd kiss.
399 And she obeyed his wish in everything
400 That might give pleasure to his love-liking.
401 And thus they lived unto their lives' fair end,
402 In perfect joy; and Jesus to us send
403 Meek husbands, and young ones, and fresh in bed,
404 And good luck to outlive them that we wed.
405 And I pray Jesus to cut short the lives
406 Of those who'll not be governed by their wives;
407 And old and querulous niggards with their pence,
408 And send them soon a mortal pestilence!