

Chaucer's Marriage Group
Dr. Brian McFadden
ENGL 2323
British Literature 1

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

- As we have seen, the Wife opposes learned clerical views of marriage and sexuality
- Her prologue is about how she gains mastery over her husbands
- Her tale about gaining mastery and the nature of true nobility

The Friar and the Summoner interrupt the discussion with a humorous interlude

- The Friar congratulates the Wife on telling a good tale, although he says she should probably leave learned discussion to the scholars
- His tale is about a summoner who takes bribes to keep people out of the Archdeacon's court; on the road, he encounters a demon looking for souls to take, and they agree to show each other their secrets for collection; needless to say, it doesn't end well for the summoner when a woman he is trying to shake down says "may the devil take you".
- The Summoner then retaliates with a tale about a friar who keeps taking contributions from a bedridden old man while flirting with his wife; he promises to make a contribution that he has hidden down under the covers, but when the friar reaches down to retrieve it, the man flatulates into his hand

The Clerk's Tale

- The Clerk is probably none too happy with the Wife for saying that clerks have nothing good to say about women
- He tells a story from Petrarch about a nobleman named Walter who marries and decides to test his wife Griselda; he slowly strips her of her rights and privileges, even taking away their infant daughter, but Griselda bears it patiently
- The last test is that after a number of years Walter says that he will put Griselda aside and marry a younger woman, who he brings in to show her; after Griselda accepts this, he reveals that the young woman is in fact their daughter, and that she has passed all the tests
- The Clerk thus demonstrates that a clerk can in fact tell a tale of a good wife, although he does not recommend testing one's wife in this way

The Merchant's Tale

- The Merchant, who has been married two months and is not liking it, tells a tale to agree that there is plenty of 'wo in mariage'
- An old knight named January who has never married decides to wed a much younger woman named May, and their sexual encounters are, well, not the greatest. His squire Damian has fallen in love with May, and they begin an affair that requires they climb up a pear tree in January's garden after he goes blind due to his age
- The gods Pluto and Proserpina are watching, and he says that women are so unfaithful that he will restore January's sight at the worst possible moment, while Proserpina says men are so lecherous that she will give May a foolproof excuse
- Sure enough, they all go to the garden, the young couple climbs the tree and get busy, and January gets his sight back. He sees them and demands to know what is going on, and May

says that wrestling in a tree with a young man is a cure for blindness, and that his eyesight wasn't yet clear enough to see she wasn't having sex with Damian. He buys it and they (all) live happily ever after...

The Squire's Tale

- The Squire begins to tell a long courtly romance about the xxxxx king Cambuscan who has a son and a daughter. On the twentieth anniversary of his reign, a mysterious knight comes to his court bearing all sorts of wondrous enchanted gifts
- To Canace, the king's daughter, the knight gives a magical ring that lets the wearer speak the language of any living being.
- However, the Squire goes into so much detail about the gifts, the knight, and the feast that his story is dragging on, and the Franklin rather tactfully finds a way to get him to stop talking. The Host chides the Franklin, so he then goes into his tale.

The Franklin's Tale

- The Franklin tells the story of a love triangle between the knight Arveragus, his wife Dorigen, and a young squire named Aurelius
- Dorigen makes a rash promise to love Aurelius in a courtly way if he makes the rocks on the shore disappear, and he gets a 'philosopher' who can produce illusions make them appear to be gone
- When Arveragus returns, she explains the situation and Arveragus tells her to keep her promise, but not to tell anyone about it
- When Aurelius sees how much pain he is causing her, he releases her from her promise, and the philosopher, on hearing that Aurelius didn't get her love, releases him from the debt he incurred to pay for the illusion
- The Franklin then ends with the question: who was the most 'free' (generous)?