Wife of Bath’s Tale Reading Guide

1. When is this story set?
2. How does the Wife of Bath pay respect to the Friar at the beginning of the tale? Why do you think she does this?
3. What crime does the knight commit in the beginning of the story?
4. When she spares his life, the queen sets the knight out on a quest. What is he supposed to find?
5. Read Ovid’s story of King Midas. What has the Wife of Bath gotten wrong in this tale? What was Chaucer’s purpose in having her make this error? Support yourself.
6. What do women want, according to the ugly old woman?
7. What did the knight have to give the woman in return for her saving his life?
8. When the old woman asks the knight to treat her better, he refuses. Why?
9. What does gentility mean? What is the old woman’s argument about gentility?
10. What is the old woman’s argument about poverty?
11. In the end she gives him a choice. What is this choice, and what does he choose?
12. What’s the moral of the Wife of Bath’s story?
13. This story is an example of a travesty (where one takes a small issue and blows it way out of proportion in order to mock the situation at hand). How?

Connections:

1. In what ways does this tale connect to the Wife of Bath’s prologue? (Think about the ideas, the argument, the type of story, the character traits, etc.)
2. In what ways does it seem to contradict her prologue?

**A section of Metamorphosis by Ovid**

“. . . And wrapped a purple turban round his head,

Which spared his vanity and held his secret.

Only the slave who trimmed King Midas’ hair

Knew what another slave would love to know.

The story burned his lips – where could he tell it?

He kneeled as if to pray and with quick fingers

Thrust hand in earth and with lips above it whispered

“King Midas has ass ears,” then closed his voice

Within the hole he made, covering it up

With large handfuls of moist earth. Then frightened,

He ran away. But the whispering reeds grew up

Around that spot and through the earth between them

The imprisoned voice came whispering to the wind,

Then all the world learned of Midas’s ears . . .”