



How Would the Wife of Bath Debate the Church Fathers?

Student Name _____ Date _____

Like Chaucer himself, the Wife of Bath is well read. The Wife of Bath's defense of her five marriages and her pursuit of a sixth rests upon her ability to acknowledge the statements made by the church fathers on marriage and virginity and offer her own interpretation of them. Below are several passages from the writings of St. Paul and St. Jerome, two men whose opinions about women the Wife specifically alludes to in her Prologue. In the space below each example, **find the passage in the Wife's Prologue where she makes references to these ideas about marriage and virginity and write it in the space provided.** How does the Wife's opinion differ from that of the teachings of the church fathers? On what issues does she agree? The quotations below come from the following links, which you may wish to explore as you read the Wife of Bath's Prologue

- "On the Song of Songs" from the Treatise *Against Jovinian* by St. Jerome
Via EDSITEment-reviewed Internet Medieval Sourcebook
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/jerome-songofsongs.html>
- On Marriage and Virginity from the Treatise *Against Jovinian* by St. Jerome
Via EDSITEment-reviewed Internet Medieval Sourcebook
<http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/jerome-marriage.html>
- The Bible on Marriage
Via EDSITEment-reviewed Internet Medieval Sourcebook
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/bible-marr.html>

1. Should people remarry?

"The turtle, the chastest of birds, always dwelling in lofty places, is a type of the Saviour. Let us read the works of naturalists and we shall find that it is the nature of the turtle-dove, *if it lose its mate, not to take another; and we shall understand that second marriage is repudiated even by dumb birds.*" -- **St. Jerome: From "On the Song of Songs" from the Treatise *Against Jovinian***

The Wife of Bath Responds:

2. Is marriage a necessary evil?

“But I say to the Unmarried and to widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I [unmarried]. But if they have not continency [ability to refrain from sex], let them marry: for it is *better to marry than to burn.*” -- **On Marriage and Virginity from the Treatise Against Jovinian by St. Jerome**

The Wife of Bath Responds:

3. Should one marry or remain single?

“He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: 7:33 But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. 7:34 There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.” -- **Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians**

The Wife of Bath Responds:

4. What if everyone were a virgin?

"But you will say: "If everybody were a virgin, what would become of the human race"? Like shall here beget like. If everyone were a widow, or continent in marriage, how will mortal men be propagated?... Be not afraid that all will become virgins: virginity is a hard matter, and therefore rare, because it is hard: "Many are called, few chosen." Many begin, few persevere. And so the reward is great for those who have persevered." -- **On Marriage and Virginity from the Treatise *Against Jovinian* by St. Jerome**

The Wife of Bath Responds:

5. Who should have the most power in a marriage: the wife or the husband?

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. 5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. 5:24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; 5:26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 5:27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. 5:28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself." -- **Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians**

The Wife of Bath Responds:
