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**A CANTERBURY TALE
FROM THE WIFE
OF BATH**

**Comedy adapted by Herman Ammann
from Geoffrey Chaucer**

Dramatic Publishing Company
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(A CANTERBURY TALE FROM THE WIFE OF BATH)

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ABOUT THE PLAY

The Wife of Bath is nearly everybody's favorite pilgrim in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer tells us that "she was a worthy woman all her life . . . husbands at the altar she had five (not counting other company in her youth) . . . The remedies of love she knew perchance, for in that art she'd learned each song and dance."

So when it came her turn to tell a tale, what subject did she choose? Inevitably, love. Sir Gallant Dilemma, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table, has a sweetheart, the beautiful Princess Oscarina. But Sir Gallant has committed a crime punishable by death. Just as the headsman's axe is about to descend, Princess Oscarina intervenes and pleads with the queen to spare his life. The Queen consents, providing that Sir Gallant can answer a question . . . a question which the Ladies of the Court call unanswerable. But valiant to the end, Sir Gallant sets out to find the answer. He is aided by a Wizard (who would have made Merlin turn polka-dotted with envy) and an old Crone (who is uglier than the dragon in the moat).

Does he find the answer? Does he win Oscarina? Well, this is a comedy, so you can probably guess — but we'll let you read the play to find out for sure.

Dramatizing one of Chaucer's stories for a general audience is not an easy task; but Herman Ammann, who has also brought to the stage "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" and "The Little Match Girl," has a knack for digging into the heart of things (like human beings) and unearthing an understanding of people which makes his characters real. Thus, his plays say something worth hearing while keeping the entertainment value high.

This play should work well for contests, nights of one-acts, assembly programs, and classrooms. The 'Stage Magic' Production Script (see next page) includes helpful directions for making costumes and scenery and for directing this particular "Canterbury Tale."

A CANTERBURY TALE from the WIFE OF BATH

This play was first presented at the Schulenburg, Texas, Theatre Festival, under the direction of Bill Butts, on April 10 & 11, 1970. It was dual-cast, with the first person of each pair appearing the first night and the second person the second night.

THE WIFE OF BATH	Barbara Bucek Ernestine Surman
JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES	Chuck Lewis
PRINCESS OSCARINA	Darise Tackett Amy Hawkins
SIR GALLANT DILEMMA	Mark Meyer
GUARDS	} Michael Hepner Ronnie Peschke
QUEEN	
LADY FUMBLE	Kathleen Hafer Rita Upton
LADY STUMBLE	Suzanne Hafer Patricia Hepner
LADY BUMBLE	Nancy Sustr Brenda Michalec
WIZARD	Alan Mikesky
LORD BUMBLE	Billy Wagner Gary Gassmann
CRONE	Paula Schwartz Alice Hepner

Scene: *King Arthur's Court*

Once upon a time

†

The cast may be reduced to nine by double-casting the roles of Wife of Bath and the Queen (or one of the Ladies), and the roles of Princess Oscarina and the Crone, and omitting the guards.

THE DIRECTOR'S PRODUCTION SCRIPT

The Director's Production Script (prompt book) available for this play contains numerous aids designed to save the director hours and hours of valuable time.

Included in the Director's Production Script are drawings of costumes, along with detailed suggestions for color, material, and other aspects of making or finding the costumes. You will also find floor plans drawn to scale; scale drawings of scenery, with suggestions for making or acquiring unusual set pieces, and suggestions for making or finding unusual props.

Also included is information on lighting, make-up, music, special effects, or whatever technicalities the play calls for.

The full text of the play is included, with detailed stage directions which show where each actor should be and what he should do all the while he is on stage. Experienced directors have used our blocking as a time-saving foundation upon which to mold their own creative ideas. Inexperienced directors have found our stage directions to be a priceless aid in solving problems of movement, picturization, focus, balance, and other aspects of staging. For the beginning director, using one of our Production Scripts is almost like having a professional director sitting beside you at rehearsals.

The Director's Production Script also contains a detailed discussion of characterization, with suggestions for helping each performer understand the role.

In the case of our one-act classics, the Director's Production Script saves the director even more time by providing well-researched information on the background, history, and significance of the play and its author.

Our Director's Production Scripts have become an indispensable tool for many theatres.

A Canterbury Tale from the Wife of Bath

By Herman Ammann

[*The WIFE OF BATH steps onto the apron and smiles at the audience knowingly.*]

WIFE OF BATH.

Experience, the *one* authority
In this whole world, provides the right for me
To speak of all the woe in marriage.
For, my lords, since the twelfth year of my age
Of husbands at the altar I've had five.
(I thank my God that I am still alive.)
I've known their love, their grief, their wrath —
I've often been a weary wife of Bath!
But, ladies, hear my wisdom, if you can,
And I will show you how to hold your man.
Then from this road to Canterbury, climb
With me backward to King Arthur's time,
Where you will see how love must fight to win —
And with a Prologue will I first begin . . .

[*She disappears as CURTAIN opens, revealing a castle's silhouette in the distant background, flanked by trees describing a formal garden. At Down Left is a long bench. At Down Right is a fountain encircled by a wall. JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES enters from among the trees and reads from a scroll — importantly.*]

JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES. "Ye Prologue," by Jack-of-All-Trades [*Bow*].

In days of yore —
Those times before
Chivalry was dead —
There lived in this land
A mighty band —
Protectors of the King . . .
And also the Queen . . .

And a lot of other people too numerous to mention.

There was this table,
A part of the fable,
That was long and round, you see.

[*Double-take at his scroll*]

Long? and round? [*Scratches his head*] Oh me!

[*Sbrugs*] Well anyway . . .

It was great to be able
To sit at the table
And give advice
And do everything nice.
For honor and fame
Was the name of the game.
Now be filled with delight
At this wondrous sight,
For this is the hour
When Knighthood was in flower . . .

[*A pretty young maiden, PRINCESS OSCARINA, enters. She is crying. JACK is confused.*]

JACK. But hark! A maiden cries!

Can these [*pointing to his scroll*] be lies?

What a sorry sight! [*Indicating the Princess*]

[*Excited VOICES are heard offstage.*]

FIRST VOICE. Stop in the name of the king!

SECOND VOICE. There is the poacher! Run him through!

THIRD VOICE. Take him, dead or alive!

JACK. [*Peering into the wings*]

And here comes a knight

In full flight.

GOD SAVE THE KING! [*Runs out*]

OSCARINA. Oh, what is all that shouting? I'm frightened.
I wish Sir Gallant were here to protect me!

[*SIR GALLANT DILEMMA enters. He has a dagger in his hand; it is dripping blood.*]

OSCARINA. Sir Gallant, my love – is that you! What is happening?

SIR GALLANT. Oscarina, my princess! You startled me. Quickly – I must hide!

OSCARINA. There's blood on your dagger! What has happened? Tell me!

SIR GALLANT. There is no time. They are hunting me down. [*He tries to run; she grabs his sleeve and holds him.*]

OSCARINA. Why? What have you done?

SIR GALLANT. I have killed the Stag – the King's prize Stag!

OSCARINA. Oh no! It cannot be true! Not a Stag from the Royal Forest. You would never do such a horrible thing!

SIR GALLANT. There is no time to discuss it now. I must hide until I have time to prove my innocence. [*He is torn between his desire to run and the code of chivalry which says he must be polite to a damsel in distress.*]

OSCARINA. [*Holding on to him like a damsel in distress*] But I must know. I want to know all the details. Tell me how it came about.

SIR GALLANT. I swear on my honor it was an accident – but there is no time to tell more.

[*Enter JACK, followed by GUARDS. They run to Sir Gallant. JACK is carrying a spear which he points at Sir Gallant's heart.*]

JACK. Aha – Sir Gallant Dilemma! You knave – I have caught you at last. My orders are to slay you on sight. The King will grant me a fine reward for this day's work!

OSCARINA. [*To Jack*] Say, I thought you were just a Prologue. Where did you get that spear?

JACK. [*Importantly*] I am a jack-of-all-trades. It is now my role to avenge the murder of the King's pet deer.

SIR GALLANT. It was an accident. I killed the Stag by mistake.

JACK. Oh, no doubt he happened to run right into your arrow . . .

SIR GALLANT. He wandered behind the target at which I aimed. I was practicing for the tournament.

JACK. Oh, you missed the target! You — Sir Gallant Dilemma — the best archer in Camelot . . . the very first time you miss the bull's eye, the King's prize Stag just happens to be in the way! Ha!

SIR GALLANT. It is true. The arrow was flying straight to the target, but it hit a twig. Its course was changed and it struck the Stag in the neck.

JACK. You make fine talk — but your dagger gives you away! You slew the Stag with your dagger — it drips blood!

OSCARINA. He would not do such a thing. He is a Knight of the Round Table. He would never slay the King's Stag . . .

SIR GALLANT. The dagger drips the blood of the Stag because the poor animal was suffering. I meant to hasten its end.

OSCARINA. [*Covering her face with her hands in anticipation of the fate which awaits the man she loves*] Then you *did* kill the Stag!

JACK. And if the King's guards hadn't come along, you'd have roasted the animal and eaten it — just to keep from littering the courtyard!

[*QUEEN enters with three LADIES of the Court — LADY BUMBLE, LADY FUMBLE, and LADY STUMBLE.*]

JACK. You'll see what you're going to get — and soon! Here comes the Queen, with her Ladies of the Court. [*ALL bow low to the Queen.*]

QUEEN. What is going on here? Why do you point the spear at Sir Gallant's heart?

JACK. He slew the King's Stag. His dagger drips its blood.

QUEEN. Not Sir Gallant. Put down your spear. Sir Gallant is a trusted Knight.

SIR GALLANT. But I am afraid it's true, your Majesty, although it was an unfortunate accident. I did not mean to kill the Stag.

QUEEN. The penalty for killing the Stag is death by the axe. You knew this, did you not?

SIR GALLANT. I did. It is the law of the land.

QUEEN. Then I have no choice. You must die. [*To Jack*] Bring the headsman.

[*JACK exits gleefully.*]

LADY FUMBLE. I have never seen an execution. I mean up close like this. I fear I shall faint to see such a handsome head roll. [*Giggle.*]

LADY STUMBLE. I have seen them roll, but I was always peering from behind my fan. [*Fans herself with an empty hand*] Oh dear, I forgot to bring my fan! What will I do?

LADY BUMBLE. Do as I do, my dear. [*She is very haughty*] Cover your eyes with your hands. [*Does so*] You can always peek through the fingers. [*Does so.*]

OSCARINA. How can you be so cruel? You are heartless! Sir Gallant is a Knight of the Round Table, sworn to protect you, and yet you . . . you relish the gory sight of his . . . his . . . his — [*She can't say it; she runs to bench and sits, sobbing.*]

LADY BUMBLE. Well, after all . . . ! I mean, it is a rather large table; there *are* other Knights.

LADY FUMBLE. But he is so handsome. Some of the others have dreary features. Perhaps we could arrange for a substitute.

OSCARINA. It is a shame it isn't *your* heads . . . there doesn't seem to be anything in them.

[*The LADIES toss their heads in a huff and sulk.*]

QUEEN. I have never believed in capital punishment myself, but you know the King, Oscarina; he is very set in his ways. And the Stag was his favorite. He has been feeding it oats all fall. He even planted some corn, and he put out a block of salt for it to lick. And just last week he built his blind — heated, and stocked with refreshments. The King is a mighty hunter! He won't be happy to hear that someone beat him to his best trophy.

[*JACK returns, wearing a headsman's hood and carrying the axe.*]

JACK. Oh boy, oh boy, I have never cut off the head of a knight before! [*Removes his hood to blow a spot of dust off*

the axe. OSCARINA breathes, "Not him again!" JACK runs a finger excitedly over blade.] Ouch! [He laughs gleefully.]

OSCARINA. The weak rejoice when the mighty fall.

QUEEN. His head will fall. That's all.

SIR GALLANT. Isn't that enough?

QUEEN. Quiet! *[To Jack]* Proceed with the execution.

[The three LADIES turn to watch – jump up and down, giggling, "Yes, yes! Chop off his head," etc. JACK motions GUARDS to prepare Sir Gallant. They force SIR GALLANT to his knees and make him lay his head on the fountain wall. JACK raises the axe.]

JACK. A knight is about to fall. Knight . . . fall. Nightfall!
[He laughs appreciatively at his pun.]

OSCARINA. You are all very cruel . . . unworthy of your high stations which the coincidence of birth gave you!

QUEEN. I cannot believe that. Their heads may be empty, but I don't think they are cruel. It is the excitement they crave –

LADY FUMBLE. Do humans flip and flop like a chicken?

LADY STUMBLE. Like a chicken? I don't know – but we'll soon see!

OSCARINA. We live in a cruel age!

SIR GALLANT. Cruel? It's murderous!

OSCARINA. Is there no higher ambition in this kingdom than witnessing violence? Do you never hope for lasting values in your entertainment? Oh, please, your Majesty – spare his life . . . for my sake!

QUEEN. My dear, I am not a cruel woman. I don't find pleasure in games of violence. But I have taken an oath to uphold the law of this land – even more: in the King's absence, and as the King's wife, it is my unpleasant duty to have to enforce the law.

OSCARINA. But he killed the Stag by accident . . .

QUEEN. The Stag is dead nevertheless . . .

OSCARINA. I know now why they say justice is blind!

QUEEN. Executioner, proceed with the –

OSCARINA. No! Wait! No wonder this is a man's world –

women do only what they're told. Must your obedience destroy your wisdom, your compassion . . .

QUEEN. But, my dear . . .

OSCARINA. Have you no right to think — and act — for yourself! —

QUEEN. Well . . . I . . .

OSCARINA. — without a man to tell you what to do?

QUEEN. Perhaps . . .

LADY BUMBLE. Oh, she's going to spoil all our fun.

JACK. The King's gonna be mad when he discovers all those oats went to waste.

QUEEN. Perhaps I can give him a chance to save his life.

OSCARINA. [*Kneeling, head bowed in gratitude*] Oh, your Majesty!

QUEEN. The King has gone fishing, and is not to return until late tomorrow . . . if they're biting. It would give us a little time.

JACK. Oh well, the axe needed sharpening anyhow.

QUEEN. I have decided to stay the execution until the King's return. It might even be put off indefinitely if Sir Gallant can answer a question.

JACK. I hope it's an unanswerable question.

LADY BUMBLE. This is exciting. What is an unanswerable question?

LADY FUMBLE. That's easy. A question without an answer.

LADY STUMBLE. How about an answer and no question. Wouldn't that be over sooner? Then we could get on with the execution.

SIR GALLANT. [*Quieting the hubbub*] Please! [*To the Queen*] What's the question?

QUEEN. First I will whisper it to Princess Oscarina. Come here, dear. [*Whispers in her ear. Immediately OSCARINA embraces Sir Gallant tearfully.*]

OSCARINA. It is goodbye forever! [*She runs off crying.*] The question is too hard!

SIR GALLANT. I hope the time will come when I am permitted to hear the question.

QUEEN. And so you shall. Listen. [*All gather round.*] The question is this . . . [*The CROWD leans forward, listening intently.*] And you shall have twenty-four hours to find the answer, or you will die by the axeman's stroke.

ALL. WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

QUEEN. It is this. Are you ready?

LADY BUMBLE. "Are you ready?" What kind of question is that?

LADY STUMBLE. Why anybody could answer *that* question!

LADY FUMBLE. Why, yes — certainly — "Are you ready?"— ha! ha! [*To Lady Stumble, aside*] What is the answer?

JACK. Quiet! Remember, I'm also the justice of the *peace* in this kingdom — and you're disturbing it!

QUEEN. Sir Gallant, you have twenty-four hours to answer this question: What does every woman want most of all? [*LADIES, JACK, and GUARDS begin leaving, all certain that the question will never be answered.*]

LADY FUMBLE. I am going to bring my fan tomorrow.

LADY BUMBLE. Not me — I am going to bring my knitting. And perhaps a few cupcakes.

JACK. Twenty-four hours to sharpen my axe.

[*PRINCESS OSCARINA returns and looks sadly at Sir Gallant.*]

QUEEN. Now we will leave the poor fellow alone with his thoughts. May they be pleasant ones.

OSCARINA. I wanted one last look at my darling.

QUEEN. Come, dear. He needs time to set his affairs in order.

[*They exit. SIR GALLANT paces and then sits, burying his head in his hands. WIZARD peeks out from behind a tree. He is dressed in black tights with a black cape and a black hood or pointed hat. The front of his suit is brightly covered with shooting stars, comets, moons, suns, lightning bolts, etc. The*

back of the entire suit is black. The effect is that when he faces the audience, he is easily seen, but when he turns his back and retreats upstage, as he does from time to time, he in effect becomes invisible against the background. He crosses to Sir Gallant.]

WIZARD. I see you are in deep trouble. May I offer my services?

SIR GALLANT. Who are you? Why are you dressed in that peculiar attire? Where did you come from?

WIZARD. Not so fast. One question at a time. I am dressed this way because I am a Wizard. And as for where I have been, I, Sir, have been here all the time. I am always with you.

SIR GALLANT. Don't talk nonsense. I've never seen you before.

WIZARD. Of course not. You have never needed me before. You see, Sir, I am the Wizard called "Ego." And as a wizard, I am super. Therefore you may call me "Super Ego." *Your Super Ego.*

SIR GALLANT. Please, no pig latin. I have enough troubles without having to unscramble your nonsense.

WIZARD. Cheer up. You need to find the answer to the unanswerable question. True?

SIR GALLANT. That is true, and while I hate to make rhymes, who are you?

WIZARD. As I said, Sir, I am your Super Ego — the mediator between your selfish instincts and the social world — your conscience so to speak.

SIR GALLANT. I need an answer and I get ants. Do me a favor. Go fling yourself in the moat.

WIZARD. I am here to help you. May I tell your fortune? [*Looks at Sir Gallant's hand*] Hmm. What an unfortunate fortune. It seems your lifeline stops tomorrow. Lie down on the bench. [*WIZARD pulls a small stool from behind a tree; also a quill and notebook. He places the stool beside bench and sits down, pad and quill ready.*]

SIR GALLANT. What are you going to do? If you are going to tell my fortune, shouldn't you have a crystal ball?

WIZARD. Crystal balls are out of style. I am a practitioner of a new cult. I'm a specialist.

SIR GALLANT. Why the change? I thought crystal balls were quite reliable.

WIZARD. I will be honest with you. There is a lot more money in using the couch, and the patient does all the work – I mean talking. Lie down; I'll demonstrate. [*SIR GALLANT lies down. WIZARD looks thoughtfully at ceiling.*] You spoke of an unanswerable question. There is an answer to every question. Life, death – man, woman – love, hate. Your frustration is probably due to an emotional imbalance dating back to some forgotten event in your childhood. Now what is your first recollection?

SIR GALLANT. The first thing that I can remember is my Mother.

WIZARD. [*Writing*] That is what I was afraid of. You have an Oedipus Complex.

SIR GALLANT. [*Sits up*] You're a nut. I haven't the slightest idea what you are saying.

WIZARD. That makes two of us.

SIR GALLANT. What?

WIZARD. Never mind. The unanswerable question is: "What does every woman want most of all?"

SIR GALLANT. How did you know?

WIZARD. It is my motto: [*Rise, salute*] "Your friendly Super Ego knows more than even ye know."

SIR GALLANT. You'd better if you expect to help me – because I have but twenty-four hours to find the answer.

WIZARD. The solution is very simple. I am really stealing your money giving you this advice.

SIR GALLANT. You have the answer?

WIZARD. Like I said – "Your friendly Super Ego – "

SIR GALLANT. Hurry – give me the answer or you will join the Stag!

WIZARD. The money, Sir; shower me with coinage! [*SIR GALLANT gives him some gold pieces.*]

SIR GALLANT. Here is some gold. It's nearly all I have.

[WIZARD *rubs his hands in glee; tests coins; counts them; bites them. SIR GALLANT grabs him by the collar and shakes him.*]

SIR GALLANT. The answer!

WIZARD. To find the answer . . . ask the first woman who comes along.

SIR GALLANT. You mean that is all there is to it? You took my money for that?

WIZARD. That is why they call me a Wizard. Now do as I say. Here comes one now. I shall be nearby.

SIR GALLANT. But she will see you.

WIZARD. No, she won't. Only you can see me. To all others I am invisible. Remember, I am your Super Ego.

SIR GALLANT. Don't start that again. Get out of here!

[WIZARD *retires upstage, taking his stool with him, and sitting with his back to the audience, becoming invisible. LADY FUMBLE enters. SIR GALLANT rises to intercept her.*]

LADY FUMBLE. Sir Gallant! What a surprise to see you! I thought you'd be frantically seeking the answer to that . . . ha! ha! . . . fatal question. [*She drops her purse. SIR GALLANT picks it up and hands it to her.*]

SIR GALLANT. I know you. You are one of the Ladies of the Court. But I've forgotten your name.

LADY FUMBLE. [*Drops her purse again, and he picks it up*] They call me Lady Fumble. I haven't the slightest idea where I got such a name!

SIR GALLANT. I thought you might be able to help me.

LADY FUMBLE. [*Drops purse again, spilling contents over the floor. She gets down on her hands and knees and begins picking them up. SIR GALLANT starts to help, but she waves him away.*] Oh, let me do it — I can't seem to hold on to anything. Yes, I will help you if I can. What do you want to know?

SIR GALLANT. My Lady, what is it that you desire most of all?

LADY FUMBLE. That's easy. I want riches. Possessions.