WIFE OF BATH: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – Discuss the following questions in a small group before we move on to synthesize all three tales.

1. In her prologue, the Wife of Bath selectively reconstructs and presents her own life. How does she define herself, and what might she have left out? Does she accept any responsibility for her life and its troubles, or does she simply shift the blame onto her husbands, “men” in general, or “women” in general? What might be the impact of the Wife’s revelation that she (and every woman) is “a gossip and a liar” on the credibility of her story?
2. What is the relationship between sex and violence in the Wife’s Prologue? Is Alison a “battered wife”, and if so, what are the social and psychological points being made about this in both her Prologue and Tale? Is this related to her claim regarding men’s “linguistic and overarching dominance” over women? Why does Chaucer have the Wife choose an Arthurian romance to tell her Tale? In what ways does the Tale back up the themes from the Wife’s prologue? In what ways does the Tale contradict the themes from the Wife’s prologue?
3. The Tale centers around rape – can Alison be said to have “raped” her own husbands based on her Tale’s treatment of rape? If so, why? If not, why not? Is the implication that rape is a crime born of frustration and social exclusion – the young knight has no defined status – and is this how the knight feels he needs to prove himself? Therefore, who is to blame for this: the individual, society, the Church, the romance genre (which stresses the need for a young man of high status to prove himself as a lover), upbringing (in the chivalric tradition of winning honor by violence, and courtly love), or an unattainable ideal? Does the knight get the punishment he deserves, or is he rewarded (with the collusion of the queen and her ladies) for raping the girl? Is the rape “undone” by the conclusion? I understand that this is a controversial set of questions, and I’d like you to take some time to consider the time period and how the Wife of Bath presents herself and her story. You can also relate these concepts to how we approach rape today, especially since it’s become a more prominent dialogue in just the past few years.