

## The Wife of Bath's Prologue

“Experience, though no authority  
 Were in this world, would be enough for me  
 To speak of woe that married life affords;  
 For since I was twelve years of age, my lords,  
 Thanks be to God eternally alive,  
 Of husbands at the church door I’ve had five  
 (If I have wed that often legally),  
 And all were worthy men in their degree.  
 But I was told not very long ago  
 That as but once did Jesus ever go  
 To a wedding (in Cana, Galilee),  
 By that example he was teaching me  
 That only once in life should I be wed.  
 And listen what a sharp word, too, was said  
 Beside a well by Jesus, God and man,  
 In a reproof of the Samaritan:  
 ‘Now you have had five husbands,’ Jesus said,  
 ‘But he who has you now, I say instead,  
 Is not your husband.’ That he said, no doubt,  
 But what he meant I haven’t figured out;  
 For I must ask, why is it the fifth man  
 Wasn’t husband to the Samaritan?  
 How many men was she allowed to wed?  
 In all my years I’ve never heard it said  
 Exactly how this number is defined;  
 Men may surmise and gloss how it’s divined,  
 But I expressly know it’s not a lie  
 God bade us to increase and multiply—  
 That noble text I well appreciate.  
 I also know the Lord said that my mate  
 Should leave for me his father and his mother,  
 But mentioned not one number or another,  
 Not bigamy nor yet octogamy.  
 Why should men speak, then, disapprovingly?  
 “Look, here’s the wise king, lordly Solomon:  
 I do believe his wives were more than one.  
 Would that the Lord permitted me to be  
 Refreshed as half as often as was he.  
 A gift from God he had for all his wives,  
 No man will ever have such in our lives.  
 God knows, this noble king, if I am right,  
 Had many a merry bout on that first night  
 With each of them, he was so much alive.  
 And God be blest that I have married five,  
 Of which I have picked out the very best,  
 Both for their hanging purse and for their chest.  
 As many different schools make perfect clerks,  
 So practice that’s diverse in sundry works  
 Will make a perfect workman certainly;  
 Five-husband schooling’s done the same for me.  
 The sixth is welcome when he comes along;  
 I won’t be keeping myself chaste for long,  
 For when one husband from this world is gone  
 Some Christian man will wed me early on—  
 For as the Apostle says, then I am free  
 To wed in God’s name when it pleases me.  
 It’s no sin to be married, he has said,  
 For if you’re burning, better to be wed.

What do I care if folks speak evilly  
 Of curséd Lamech and his bigamy?  
 A holy man was Abraham, I know,  
 And Jacob, too, as far as that may go,  
 Yet each with more than two wives came to dwell,  
 Like many other holy men as well.  
 5 And where in any age can it be said  
 That God on high forbade that we be wed  
 By any word express? Please answer me.  
 Or when did he command virginity?  
 I know as well as you, for there’s no doubt,  
 10 When maidenhood the Apostle spoke about  
 He said he had no precept. To be sure,  
 A woman may be counseled to be pure,  
 But counsel and commandment aren’t the same.  
 To leave it to our judgment was his aim.  
 15 For if God did command virginity,  
 Then marriage he condemned concurrently;  
 And surely if no seed were ever sown,  
 From where then would virginity be grown?  
 Paul wouldn’t dare command, would least invoke  
 20 A thing on which his Master never spoke.  
 A prize is set up for virginity:  
 Who runs the best may have it, let us see.  
 “But not for all is this word seen as right,  
 It’s only as God wills it in his might.  
 25 The Apostle was a virgin, well I note;  
 But nonetheless, although he said and wrote  
 That he wished everyone would be as he,  
 It was but to advise virginity.  
 He allows I be a wife, if that’s my place,  
 30 In his indulgence, so it’s no disgrace  
 To marry if my latest mate should die—  
 Without the ‘bigamy’ that some would cry.  
 ‘It’s best a man should not a woman touch’;  
 He meant in bed or on the couch or such.  
 35 In mixing fire and tinder danger lies;  
 What this example means you realize.  
 And that’s the sum: he held virginity  
 Was better than to wed in frailty.  
 (I call it ‘frailty’ unless the two  
 40 Would chaste remain till both their lives were through.)  
 “I grant it well, but envy I do not,  
 That maidenhood may be the better lot.  
 In soul and body some like being clean,  
 And I can make no boasts. But have you seen  
 44 A Among possessions that the nobles hold  
 If each and every vessel is of gold?  
 Some are of service though they be of wood.  
 In sundry ways God calls us to his good,  
 Each by his own God-given gift sustained,  
 44F Some this, some that, as heaven has ordained.  
 45 “A great perfection is virginity,  
 And continence maintained devotedly;  
 But Christ, who of perfection is the well,  
 Did not bid everyone to go and sell  
 All that he had and give it to the poor  
 50 And thereby follow him; no, this was for  
 The ones desiring to live perfectly—  
 And by your leave, my lords, that isn’t me.

For I'll bestow the flower of my life  
 In all the acts and fruits of being wife.  
 "And tell me for what reason, if you can,  
 Were organs made for reproducing man  
 Who's made in such a wise and perfect way?  
 They were not made for nothing, safe to say.  
 Gloss over whoso will, tell all creation  
 Our little things both are for urination,  
 And that they're made so different in detail  
 So we can know the female from the male  
 And for no other reason—you say 'No'?  
 Experience knows well it isn't so.  
 That learned men I not provoke to oath,  
 I mean to say that they were made for both—  
 That is, both for relief and for our ease  
 To procreate, so God we not displease.  
 Why else should men into their ledgers set  
 That every man yield to his wife her debt?  
 And how can he pay this emolument  
 Unless he use his simple instrument?  
 That's why upon all creatures these are set,  
 To urinate and also to beget.

"But I don't say that everyone possessing  
 Equipment such as this as I was stressing  
 Must go and use it for engendering,  
 Lest chastity be held a worthless thing.  
 Christ was a virgin though shaped as a man,  
 And many a saint since this world first began  
 Has also lived in perfect chastity.  
 I don't begrudge them their virginity;  
 They're bread from finest wheat, so be it said,  
 And let us wives be known as barley bread.  
 And yet with barley bread, as Mark can tell,  
 Was many a man by Jesus nourished well.  
 In such estate as God calls each of us  
 I'll persevere. I'm not fastidious,  
 In wifehood I will use my instrument  
 As freely as my Maker has it sent.  
 If I hold back, God bring me misery!  
 My spouse shall have it day and night, when he  
 Desires he may come forth and pay his debt.  
 I'll have a husband—I'm not quitting yet—  
 And he will be my debtor and my slave,  
 And in the flesh his troubles will be grave  
 As long as I continue as his wife;  
 For I will have the power all my life  
 Over his body, I and never he.  
 It's just as the Apostle said to me  
 And bade them love us well, which I must say  
 Are teachings to my liking all the way."

### *An Interlude*

The Pardoner spoke up immediately.  
 "Now dame, by God and by Saint John," said he,  
 "As a noble preacher on the case you'll pass.  
 I almost wed a wife, but then, alas,  
 Why buy it with my flesh, a price so dear?  
 I'd rather not get married, not this year."  
 "Abide," she said, "my tale is not begun!

No, you'll be drinking from another tun, 170  
 Before I'm through, that tastes much worse than ale.  
 115 And when I'm finished telling you my tale  
 Of tribulation known to man and wife—  
 Of which I've been an expert all my life  
 (That is to say, of which I've been the whip)— 175  
 Then make your choice whether you would sip  
 120 From this same tun that I'm about to broach.  
 Be wary lest too near it you approach.  
 I'll tell you good examples, more than ten.  
 'Whoso would not be warned by other men, 180  
 By him shall other men corrected be.'  
 125 These words were written by Ptolemy,  
 You'll find it if you read his *Almagest*.  
 "Dame, if you will, I prayerfully request,"  
 The Pardoner said, "that just as you began 185  
 Tell us your tale and do not spare a man  
 130 And of your practice teach us younger men."  
 "If you desire, I'll do so gladly, then,"  
 She said. "But first I pray this company,  
 If I should speak as it may fancy me, 190  
 Will not be too upset by what I say,  
 135 For my intent is nothing but to play.

### *The Wife Continues*

"My lords, I now will offer you my tale.  
 140 If ever I may drink of wine or ale,  
 I'll tell the truth on husbands that I've had, 195  
 As three of them were good and two were bad.  
 The three men who were good were rich and old,  
 Indeed were scarcely able to uphold  
 145 The contract binding them. By God above,  
 You know exactly what I'm speaking of. 200  
 So help me God, I laugh to think, all right,  
 How pitifully I made them work all night,  
 Though, by my faith, it meant not much to me;  
 150 They gave me so much of their treasury  
 I didn't need to practice diligence 205  
 To win their love or show them reverence.  
 For they loved me so well, by God above,  
 That I put little value in their love.  
 155 The woman's wise who's busy till she's won  
 The love she wants, or she'll be left with none. 210  
 But since I had them wholly in my hand  
 And they had given to me all their land,  
 Why should I pay them heed and try to please,  
 160 Unless it were for profit and for ease?  
 But by my faith, I worked them for so long 215  
 That many a night they sang a plaintive song.  
 The bacon wasn't fetched for them, I know,  
 Like for some men in Essex at Dunmow.  
 I governed them so strictly by my law  
 That each of them was happy to a flaw 220  
 To bring me back some nice things from the fair,  
 165 And glad when I would speak with pleasant air,  
 For God knows I would chide them spitefully.  
 "Now hear how well I bore myself, and see,  
 The wise among you wives who understand, 225  
 How you should speak: accuse them out of hand.

There's no man who can falsely swear and lie  
 As half as boldly as a woman. I  
 Don't say this to those wives already wise,  
 Save when they've made mistakes—then I advise  
 That she who knows what's good for her and bad  
 Must prove the chough has gone stark raving mad  
 And call as witness her assenting maid.  
 Now listen to my typical tirade:  
 "Old sluggard, you would have me dress this way?  
 Why does my neighbor's wife have fine array?  
 She is so honored everywhere she goes;  
 I sit at home, I have no nifty clothes.  
 What are you up to at my neighbor's house?  
 Is she so fair? So amorous are you, spouse?  
 What do you whisper with our maid? Ah, bless me!  
 Sir Lecher, will you stop your treachery!  
 Yet if I have a confidant or friend  
 In innocence, you chide me to no end  
 If I so much as walk into his house.  
 You come home just as drunken as a mouse  
 And preach upon your bench. Bad luck to you!  
 You say to me that it's a mighty rue  
 To marry one who's poor, for the expense;  
 And if she's rich and highborn, you commence  
 To talk about the torment and the folly  
 Of suffering all her pride and melancholy.  
 And if she's fair, you thorough knave, you say  
 That every lecher wants her right away,  
 That she'll not long in chastity abide  
 When she's assailed on each and every side.  
 "You say that some desire us for our fortunes,  
 Some for our looks, some for our good proportions,  
 And some because she either sings or dances,  
 Some for her noble blood and flirty glances,  
 Her hands and arms so graceful—without fail  
 All go right to the devil by your tale.  
 You say that men can't keep a castle wall  
 That's swarmed upon as long, that it will fall.  
 "If she looks foul, then you declare that she  
 Will lust for every fellow she may see,  
 Leap on him like a spaniel in a trice  
 Until she finds the man who'll pay her price.  
 In all the lake there's not one goose so gray  
 That it will be without a mate, you say.  
 Yet it's a hard thing, you would have it known,  
 To have what no man willingly would own  
 (You say it, loafer, when you go to bed),  
 And that a wise man has no need to wed  
 Nor any man whose aim is heaven's wonder.  
 May lightning and a bolt of wildest thunder  
 Come break your withered neck with fiery stroke!  
 "You say a house that leaks, and also smoke,  
 And wives who scold, cause men to run away  
 From their own homes. Ah, benedicite!  
 What ails such an old fellow so to chide?  
 "You say we wives all of our vices hide  
 Until we wed, and then we let them show.  
 The proverb of a rascal whom I know!  
 "You say the ox, the ass, the hound, the horse  
 At various times are tested, as, of course,

Are bowls and basins ere a buy is made,  
 And spoons and stools, and other household trade  
 Like pots and clothes, and other such array;  
 230 But menfolk never test their wives, you say, 290  
 Till they are wed—old dotard, ne'er do well!—  
 And then we show our vices, so you tell.  
 "And it displeases me, you also say,  
 If you don't praise my beauty all the day  
 And aren't forever poring on my face 235 295  
 And calling me "fair dame" in every place;  
 If you don't hold a feast upon the day  
 When I was born, dress me in rich array;  
 If you don't honor with all due respect  
 240 My nurse and chambermaid, nor deem select 300  
 All of my father's kinfolk and allies—  
 You say it, you old barrel full of lies!  
 "And our apprentice Jenkin, by his hair—  
 Those curly, golden, shining locks so fair—  
 245 And by the fact he squires me where I go, 305  
 Gives you a false suspicion. Kindly know  
 I wouldn't want him if you died tomorrow.  
 "But tell me this, why hide (be it your sorrow!)  
 The keys from me that lock your chest? I'll tell  
 250 You this, your property is mine as well. 310  
 Am I an idiot like some other dames?  
 I tell you by that lord they call Saint James,  
 You won't be—you can rave mad in the woods!—  
 Master of both my body and my goods;  
 255 You'll forgo one, I tell you to your eye. 315  
 What help is it to ask around and spy?  
 I think that you would lock me in your chest.  
 To say, "Go where you please, wife," would be best,  
 "Have fun, I won't believe tales told in malice,  
 260 For I know you to be a good wife, Alice." 320  
 We love no man who keeps such watchful eyes  
 On where we go, our liberty we prize.  
 "Above all men may he most blessed be,  
 That wise astronomer Ptolemy,  
 265 Who wrote this proverb in his *Almagest*: 325  
 "He has much higher wisdom than the rest  
 Who doesn't care who has the world in hand."  
 And by this proverb you should understand  
 That if you have enough, why should you care  
 270 How merrily some other people fare? 330  
 For by your leave, old dotard, of my stuff  
 Tonight you surely will have quite enough.  
 How great a niggard is he who refuses  
 A candlelight from the lantern that he uses;  
 275 He'd have no less light than he did before. 335  
 You have enough, so don't complain for more.  
 "And if in finest clothes, you also say,  
 In jewelry and other fine display,  
 We dress ourselves, we risk our chastity;  
 280 To back up what you say, you quote to me 340  
 The following in the Apostle's name:  
 "Clothes chastely made with proper sense of shame  
 Is what your women's dress should always be—  
 No fancy hairdos, no bright jewelry  
 285 Like pearls and gold, nor other rich array." 345  
 About your text and rubric, let me say

I'd follow them as much as would a gnat.

"You also say that I am like a cat,  
For if somebody sings a cat's fur  
She'll be content to stay inside and purr,  
But if her fur is sleek and fine she'll stay  
Inside the house not more than half a day;  
Before the dawn can break she's to her calling,  
She's showing off her fur and caterwauling—  
In other words, Sir Rascal, if well dressed  
I run out to be sure I'm well assessed.

"Old fool, what help to you are all your spies?  
If you asked Argus with his hundred eyes  
To be my bodyguard—what better measure?—  
He'd guard me only if it were my pleasure;  
As I may thrive, I'd really tweak his beard!

"You also speak of three things to be feared  
For troubling all the earth, and that for sure  
The fourth one there's no man could long endure.  
Sir Rascal dear, may Christ cut short your life,  
For still you preach and say a hateful wife  
Is one of these misfortunes. Sir, are there  
No other things to speak of and compare  
In telling all your parables? Must you  
Always include a poor wife ere you're through?"

"You also liken woman's love to hell,  
To barren land without a stream or well,  
And also to a wildly raging fire—  
The more it burns, the stronger its desire  
To consume all that will burn. You say to me  
That just as little worms destroy a tree  
A wife destroys her husband. "They have found  
This to be true, those who to wives are bound."

"My lords, just so, as you now understand,  
I accused all my old husbands out of hand  
Of saying such while they were drunk. And all  
Was false, but as my witnesses I'd call  
On Jenkin and my niece to say, 'It's so.'  
O Lord, the pain I gave them and the woe!  
Their guilt? By God's sweet grief, they hadn't any;  
And yet just like a horse I'd bite and whinny,  
Complaining well when I myself had guilt,  
For they'd have killed me had the beans been spilt.  
Who comes first to the mill is first to grind;  
I'd be first to complain, and always find  
Our war was quickly over—gladly they  
Repented things they didn't do or say.  
On wenches I would give them reprimand  
When they were so sick they could hardly stand.

"Yet each was tickled in his heart to see  
What he thought was such love for him in me.  
I swore that all my walking out by night  
Was just to keep his wenches in my sight.  
With that excuse I had me lots of mirth.  
For we are given such keen wits at birth  
To cheat and weep and spin; these God will give  
To women naturally long as they live.  
So one thing I can speak of boastfully,  
The one who came out best was always me,  
By sleight or force, or by some other thing  
Like long complaint and constant bickering.

Especially in bed were they undone,  
For there I'd scold them and deny them fun;  
I would no longer in the bed abide,  
350 Once I could feel his arm upon my side, 410  
Until he paid his ransom as he must—  
Then I would suffer him to do his lust.  
And so to every man I tell this tale:  
Gain what you can, for everything's for sale,  
355 And no hawk by an empty hand is lured. 415  
For profit all his lust I so endured  
And feigned for him a lusty appetite;  
In bacon, though, I never took delight,  
And that is why I would forever chide.  
360 For even had the pope sat down beside 420  
Them there, I wouldn't spare them at the table,  
To pay back word for word I was so able.  
So help me God who is omnipotent,  
Were I to make right now my testament  
365 I'd owe them not a word that's not repaid. 425  
I did this by the wits that I displayed  
So that they had to give up and be bested  
Or else we never would have finally rested.  
Though like a raging lion he would look,  
370 Yet he would fail at every tack he took. 430  
"Then I would say, 'Good dear, just take a peep  
At how meek-looking Wilkin is, our sheep;  
Come here, my spouse, and let me kiss your cheek;  
You should always be patient, always meek,  
375 And have a good man's conscience, as so much 435  
You like to preach of patient Job and such.  
Be always patient, since so well you preach—  
If not, a lesson we will have to teach,  
How fair it is to have a wife in peace,  
380 For there's no doubt that one of us must cease; 440  
Since woman's less reasonable than the male,  
You must therefore be patient. What can ail  
You, husband, that so much you gripe and groan?  
Is it my thing? You'd have it yours alone?  
385 Why, take it all, here, take it every bit. 445  
By Peter, curse you! such a love for it.  
If I were selling some of my belle chose  
I then could walk fresh-looking as a rose,  
But I will keep it for your own sweet tooth.  
390 You are to blame, by God, and that's the truth.' 450  
"The words we'd have were always of that sort.  
And now on my fourth husband I'll report.  
"A reveler was husband number four,  
That is to say, he had a paramour.  
395 And I was young and wanton, passionate, 455  
As jolly as a magpie, obstinate  
And strong. How I could dance to a small harp, too,  
And sing like any nightingale can do  
When I had drunk a draught of good sweet wine!  
400 Metellius, that dirty churl, the swine, 460  
Picked up a staff and took his spouse's life  
For drinking wine. If I had been his wife,  
He never would have daunted me from drinking!  
And after wine, on Venus I'd be thinking,  
405 For as surely as cold engenders hail 465  
A lustful mouth will have a lustful tail.



A tipsy woman is without defense,  
 As lechers know by their experience.  
 “But Lord Christ! when it all comes back to me,  
 Remembrance of my youth and jollity,  
 It warms the cockles of my heart. Today  
 It still does my heart good that I can say  
 I’ve had the world, what time’s been mine to pass.  
 But age that poisons everything, alas,  
 Bereft me of my beauty and my pith.  
 Well, let it go, the devil go therewith!  
 The flour is gone, there is no more to tell;  
 The bran as best I can I now must sell  
 And strive to be as merry as before.  
 And now I’ll tell of husband number four.  
 “I had within my heart a great despite  
 That he in any other took delight.  
 I paid him back, by God and by Saint Joyce,  
 With a hard staff from wood of his own choice;  
 Not with my body, not by sinful means,  
 But entertaining folks in merry scenes,  
 I made him fry in his own grease till he  
 Was quite consumed with angry jealousy.  
 By God, on earth I was his purgatory,  
 For which I hope his soul is now in glory.  
 God knows how often he would sit and sing  
 While his shoe pinched him, such a painful thing;  
 For there was none save God and me who knew  
 The many torments that I put him through.  
 He died when I came from Jerusalem;  
 Beneath the rood-beam where we buried him,  
 His tomb was surely not as finely done  
 As was great King Darius’s, the one  
 Built by Apelles with such skill and taste.  
 A costly burial would have been a waste.  
 May he fare well and God give his soul rest,  
 For he’s now in his grave, his wooden chest.  
 “Of husband number five I now will tell.  
 God grant his soul may never go to hell!  
 And yet he was to me the very worst;  
 I feel it in my ribs from last to first  
 And always will until the day I die.  
 But in our bed he was so fresh and spry,  
 To gloss away so able, heaven knows,  
 Whenever he was wanting my belle chose,  
 That though each bone he’d beaten was in pain,  
 At once he’d win back all my love again.  
 I swear I loved him best of all, for he  
 Was always playing hard to get with me.  
 We women have—the truth, so help me God—  
 In this regard a fancy that is odd;  
 That which we can’t get in an easy way  
 Is what we’ll crave and cry for all the day.  
 Forbid us something and then we’ll desire it,  
 But press it on us and we’ll not require it.  
 With coyness we trade in our affairs;  
 Great market crowds make more expensive wares  
 And what’s too cheap will not be held a prize.  
 This every woman knows if she is wise.  
 “My husband number five, God bless his soul,  
 I took for love, no riches were my goal.

He once had been an Oxford clerk, but then  
 Had left school and gone home, and boarded in  
 Our town with a good friend of mine, the one,  
 God bless her soul, whose name was Alison.  
 She knew my heart, each of my secrets well,  
 Much better than the parish priest. I’d tell  
 Her everything, disclosing to her all;  
 For had my husband pissed upon a wall  
 Or done something that could have cost his life,  
 To her and to another worthy wife—  
 And also to my niece, whom I loved well—  
 His every secret I would fully tell.  
 God knows, I did this so much, to his dread,  
 It often made his face get hot and red.  
 He felt ashamed, but blamed himself that he  
 Had told to me so great a privy.  
 “It so befell that one time during Lent,  
 As often to this close friend’s house I went  
 (And I so loved to dress up anyway  
 And take my walks in March, April, and May  
 From house to house, to hear what tales were spun),  
 This clerk named Jenkin, my friend Alison,  
 And I myself into the meadows went.  
 My husband was in London all that Lent,  
 So I had much more leisure time to play,  
 To see and to be seen along the way  
 By lusty folks. How could I know when there  
 Would come good fortune meant for me, or where?  
 And so I made my visits, I’d attend  
 Religious vigils and processions, wend  
 With pilgrims, hear the sermons preached; also  
 To miracle plays and weddings I would go.  
 The clothes that I would wear were scarlet bright;  
 There never was a worm or moth or mite,  
 As I may live, could bring to them abuse.  
 Do you know why? They always were in use.  
 “I’ll tell you now what happened next to me.  
 I’ve said we walked into the fields, we three;  
 And there we really had a chance to flirt,  
 This clerk and I. My foresight to assert,  
 While we were talking I suggested he,  
 If I wound up a widow, marry me.  
 For certainly—I say it not to boast—  
 Of good purveyance I have made the most  
 In marriages and other things as well.  
 A mouse’s heart’s not worth a leek in hell  
 If he has just one hole for which to run,  
 For if that one hole fails then all is done.  
 “I made pretense that he enchanted me  
 (My mother taught to me this subtlety);  
 I dreamt of him all night, I also said,  
 And dreamt he slew me as I lay in bed,  
 My bed as full of blood as it could be.  
 ‘But still I hope that you’ll bring good to me,  
 For blood betokens gold, or so I’m taught.’  
 And all was false, for I’d been dreaming naught,  
 I only followed all my mother’s lore  
 (On that as well as on a few things more).  
 “And now, sirs—let me see, what was I saying?  
 Aha! by God, I have it, no more straying.

“When my fourth husband lay upon the bier,  
I wept, of course, grief-stricken to appear,  
As wives must do (the custom of the land),  
And hid my face with the kerchief in my hand.  
But as I’d be provided with a mate,  
I wept but little, I can truly state.

“Now as my husband to the church was borne  
That morning, neighbors went along to mourn,  
With our clerk Jenkin being one. As God  
May help me, when I saw him trod  
Behind the bier, I thought that he had feet  
And legs as fair as ever I could meet,  
And all my heart was then in his dear hold.  
He was, I think, then twenty winters old,  
And I was forty, telling you the truth;  
But I have always had a coltish tooth.  
Gap-toothed I was, and that was for the best;  
The birthmark of Saint Venus I possessed.  
So help me God, I was a lusty one  
And fair and rich and young and full of fun;  
And truly, as my husbands said to me,  
I had the finest what’s-it there could be.  
My feelings come from Venus and my heart  
Is full of Mars; for Venus did impart  
To me all of my lecherousness and lust,  
And Mars gave me a hard and sturdy crust.  
My ascendant sign was Taurus, Mars therein.  
Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!  
For I have always followed inclination  
By virtue of my taurine constellation;  
That made me so that I could not deny  
A good fellow my Venus chamber. I  
Still have the mark of Mars upon my face  
(And also in another, private place).  
As truly as the Lord is my salvation,  
My love was never by discrimination;  
I always catered to my appetite,  
Though he be short or long or black or white.  
I didn’t care, just so he pleased me,  
How poor he was or what was his degree.

“What shall I say except, when that month ended,  
This jolly Jenkin whom I thought so splendid  
Had married me midst great solemnity.  
I gave him all the land and property  
That ever had been given me. And yet  
It was thereafter much to my regret;  
Of nothing that I wanted he would hear.  
By God, he struck me so once on the ear  
(Because I tore a page out of his book)  
That it went deaf from that one blow it took.  
But I was stubborn like a lioness  
And lashed him with my tongue without redress.  
And I’d go walking as I’d done before  
From house to house (though I would not, he swore),  
For which he oftentimes would start to preach  
To me. Old Roman stories he would teach,  
Like how Simplicius Gallus left his wife,  
Forsaking her the remainder of his life,  
Because he caught her looking out the door  
One day bareheaded—that and nothing more.

“A Roman, too, he told me of by name  
Whose wife had gone out to a summer’s game  
Without his knowledge; he forsook her too.  
590 And then he’d go and search his Bible through 650  
For a proverb of Ecclesiasticus  
Wherein he gives a firm command to us:  
No man should let his wife go roam about.  
And after that he’d quote without a doubt:  
595 ‘Whoever builds his house by using shallows 655  
And goes and pricks his blind horse over fallows  
And lets his wife seek any shrine one hallows  
Is worthy to be hung upon the gallows!’  
But all for naught, for I cared not a straw  
600 For all his proverbs or for his old saw. 660  
I’d not correct myself by his advices.  
I hate a man who tells me of my vices,  
And so do more of us, God knows, than I.  
So mad with me this made him he could die,  
605 But I would not forbear in any case. 665  
“I’ll tell you, by Saint Thomas, face-to-face  
The reason I tore from his book a page,  
Why he gave me a deaf ear in his rage.  
“He had a book that he read night and day  
610 For his amusement. He would laugh away 670  
At this book, which he called ‘Valerius  
And Theophrastus,’ with its various  
Selections: there was once a clerk in Rome,  
A cardinal whose name was Saint Jerome,  
615 Who wrote a book against Jovinian; 675  
This book also contained Tertullian,  
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise,  
An abbess who once lived near Paris; these  
Along with parables of Solomon  
620 And Ovid’s Art—the books were many a one, 680  
And all of them in this one volume bound.  
And day and night he always could be found,  
When he had leisure or was on vacation  
From any sort of worldly occupation,  
625 Reading some passage about wicked wives. 685  
Of them he knew more legends and more lives  
Than of the best of wives in Holy Writ.  
It is impossible, no doubting it,  
For any clerk to speak some good of wives  
630 Unless it deals with saints, their holy lives; 690  
No woman not a saint he’s kindly to.  
Who painted, though, the lion, tell me who?  
By God, if women ever wrote some stories  
As clerks have done in all their oratories,  
635 They would have told of men more wickedness 695  
Than all the sons of Adam could redress.  
Children of Venus and of Mercury  
Have always worked in great polarity;  
For Mercury loves wisdom, science pure,  
640 While Venus loves good times, expenditure. 700  
Because their dispositions are divergent,  
One’s descendant, the other one emergent;  
So Mercury, God knows, has desolation  
When Venus has in Pisces exaltation,  
645 And Venus falls when Mercury is raised. 705  
So by no clerk is woman ever praised.

The clerk, when he is old and cannot do  
 For Venus any work worth his old shoe,  
 Will in his dotage sit and write of how  
 A woman cannot keep her marriage vow!  
 “Now let me tell the reason why I say  
 That I was beaten for a book, I pray.  
 One night this Jenkin, who was my fifth sire,  
 Was reading in his book beside the fire.  
 He read of Eve, who by her wickedness  
 Had brought all of mankind to wretchedness,  
 The reason Jesus Christ himself was slain  
 To bring us back with his heart’s blood again.  
 ‘Of women here expressly you may find  
 That woman was the ruin of all mankind.’  
 “He read to me how Samson lost his hair,  
 Sheared by his mistress, sleeping unaware,  
 And how by this he lost both of his eyes.  
 “He read then to me—I will tell no lies—  
 Of Dejanira, she who was to blame  
 That Hercules had set himself aflame.  
 “He left out not a whit about the woe  
 That Socrates’ two wives caused him to know;  
 When Xantippe poured piss upon his head,  
 The hapless man sat there as still as dead,  
 Then wiped his head and dared not to complain,  
 But said, ‘Ere thunder stops, there comes a rain.’  
 “The tale of Pasiphaë, the queen of Crete,  
 For cursedness he thought was really sweet.  
 Fie on it! I’ll not speak in any measure  
 About her horrid lust, her grisly pleasure.  
 “Of Clytemnestra, who for lechery  
 Brought to her husband death by treachery,  
 With greatest fervor then to me he read.  
 “He told me, too, the circumstance that led  
 Amphiaraus at Thebes to lose his life;  
 My husband had a legend of his wife  
 Eriphyle, who for a brooch of gold  
 Had gone in secret to the Greeks and told  
 Of where her husband had his hiding place,  
 For which he met at Thebes with sorry grace.  
 “He told of Livia, Lucilia too,  
 Who made their husbands die, albeit true  
 One was for love, the other was for hate.  
 For Livia, one evening very late,  
 Gave poison to her husband as a foe;  
 But lecherous Lucilia loved hers so  
 That, so he might forever of her think,  
 She gave him such a love potion to drink  
 That he was dead before the morning sun.  
 And therefore husbands always are undone.  
 “He told me then how one Latumius  
 Complained one day to his friend Arrius  
 That growing in his garden was a tree  
 On which, he said, his wives (who numbered three)  
 Had hung themselves out of their hearts’ despite.  
 Said Arrius, ‘Dear brother, if you might,  
 Give me a cutting from that blessed tree,  
 And in my garden planted shall it be.’  
 “Of later date, of wives to me he read  
 Who sometimes slew their husbands while in bed,

Then with their lechers screwed the night away  
 While flat upon the floor the bodies lay.  
 Some others would drive nails into the brain  
 710 While they were sleeping, that’s how they were slain. 770  
 Still others gave them poison in their drink.  
 Of evil more than any heart can think  
 About he read, and he knew more proverbs  
 Than in this world there’s growth of grass or herbs.  
 715 ‘It’s better that your dwelling place,’ said he, 775  
 ‘With a foul dragon or a lion be  
 Than with a woman who is wont to chide.  
 High on the roof it’s better to abide  
 Than with an angry wife down in the house.  
 720 Each wicked and contrary to her spouse, 780  
 They hate all that their husbands love.’ He’d say,  
 ‘A woman casts all of her shame away  
 When she casts off her smock.’ He’d further tell,  
 ‘A woman fair, if she’s not chaste as well,  
 725 Is like a golden ring in a sow’s nose.’ 785  
 Who could have thought, whoever would suppose  
 The woe and torment that was in my heart?  
 “And when I saw that he would never part  
 With reading in this curséd book all night,  
 730 Three leaves all of a sudden I tore right 790  
 Out of his book while he was reading it,  
 Then with my fist I gave his cheek a hit  
 And he fell backwards right into the fire.  
 He jumped up like a lion full of ire  
 735 And with his fist he hit me in the head, 795  
 And I lay on the floor then as if dead.  
 And when he saw how stilly there I lay,  
 He was aghast and would have run away,  
 But then at last out of my swoon I woke.  
 740 ‘O false thief, have you slain me?’ then I spoke. 800  
 ‘You’ve murdered me for all my land, that’s why,  
 Yet let me kiss you now before I die.’  
 “Then near he came and knelt down by my side,  
 And said, ‘Dear sister Alison, my bride,  
 745 So help me God, I’d never hit my dame; 805  
 For what I’ve done you are yourself to blame.  
 Forgive me, I beseech you and implore.’  
 And then I hit him on the cheek once more.  
 ‘This much I am avenged, O thief,’ I said.  
 750 ‘I can no longer speak, I’m nearly dead.’ 810  
 “But in the end, for all we suffered through,  
 We finally reached accord between us two.  
 The bridle he put wholly in my hand  
 To have complete control of house and land,  
 755 And of his tongue and hands as well—and when 815  
 He did, I made him burn his book right then.  
 And when I had by all my mastery  
 Thus gained for myself all the sovereignty—  
 When he had said to me, ‘My own true wife,  
 760 Do as you please the balance of your life; 820  
 Keep your honor as well as my estate’—  
 From that day on we never had debate.  
 I was as true as any wife you’d find  
 From India to Denmark, and as kind,  
 765 So help me God, and he was so to me. 825  
 I pray that God who sits in majesty

Will bless his soul for all his mercy dear.  
Now I will tell my tale if you will hear.”

### Another Interruption

The Friar laughed when he had heard all this.  
He said, “If ever I have joy or bliss,  
Your tale has quite a long preamble, dame!”  
And when the Summoner heard the Friar exclaim,  
The Summoner said, “Behold, by God’s two arms!  
See how a meddling friar ever swarms.  
A fly and friar, good men, will fall into  
Each dish, into all kinds of matter. You  
Speak of preambulation? Amble or  
Go trot, shut up, or go sit down! No more,  
You’re spoiling all our fun, the way you act.”

The Friar said, “Summoner, is that a fact?  
Now by my faith, I will, before I’m through,  
Tell of a summoner such a tale or two  
That everyone will laugh throughout the place.”

“Now, Friar, damn your bloody eyes and face!”  
The Summoner said. “And damn myself as well  
If two tales, or if three, I do not tell  
Of friars ere I come to Sittingbourne.  
And with them I will cause your heart to mourn,  
For I can see your patience now is gone.”

Our Host said, “Peace! No more such goings on!”  
He said, “Now let this woman tell her tale.  
You act like people who are drunk with ale.  
Now, madam, tell your tale, for that is best.”

“I’m ready, sir,” she said, “as you request,  
With license from this worthy Friar here.”

“Yes, dame,” said he, “speak on, you’ll have my ear.”

### The Wife of Bath’s Tale

In the old days of King Arthur, today  
Still praised by Britons in a special way,  
This land was filled with fairies all about.  
The elf-queen with her jolly little rout  
In many a green field often danced. Indeed  
This was the old belief of which I read;  
I speak of many hundred years ago.  
But now such elves no one is seeing. No,  
For now the prayers and charitable desires  
Of limiters and other holy friars  
Who wander all the land, by every stream,  
As thick as specks of dust in a sunbeam,  
To bless our halls, chambers, kitchens, bowers,  
Boroughs, cities, castles, lofty towers,  
Villages, granaries, stables, dairies,  
Have made sure that no longer are there fairies.  
For where there once was wont to walk an elf  
There’s walking now the limiter himself,  
Early and late, to give his auspices,  
Say matins and his other offices,  
Go all about the limit where he’s found.  
Now women may go safely all around;  
In every bush and under every tree  
He is the only incubus, and he

Won’t do a thing except dishonor them.

It happened that King Arthur had with him  
A bachelor in his house; this lusty liver,  
While riding from his hawking by the river,  
Once chanced upon, alone as she was born, 885

830 For he, despite all that she did or said,  
By force deprived her of her maidenhead.

Because of this, there was such clamoring  
And such demand for justice to the king, 890  
This knight was all but numbered with the dead

835 By course of law, and should have lost his head  
(Which may have been the law in that milieu).  
But then the queen and other ladies too

Prayed so long that the king might grant him grace, 895  
King Arthur spared him for at least a space;  
840 He left him to the queen to do her will,  
To choose to save or order them to kill.

The queen then thanked the king with all her might,  
And after this the queen spoke with the knight 900  
When she saw opportunity one day.

845 “For you,” she said, “things stand in such a way  
You can’t be sure if you’re to live or not.  
I’ll grant you life if you can tell me what

It is that women most desire. Beware 905  
The iron ax, your neckbone now to spare!  
850 And if you cannot tell me right away,  
I’ll give you leave, a twelvemonth and a day,

That you may go to seek, that you might find  
An answer that is of sufficient kind. 910

I want your word before you take a pace:  
855 You’ll bring yourself back to this very place.”

This knight with sorrow sighed, was full of woe.  
What could he do? Not as he pleased, and so  
To go away was what he finally chose, 915  
To come back when his year was at its close

With such an answer as God might provide.  
He took his leave and forth he went to ride.

860 He sought in every house and every place  
In hopes he could secure the promised grace 920  
By learning that which women love the most.  
But he did not arrive at any coast

Where he could find two people on the matter  
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.  
865 Some said that women all love riches best, 925  
While some said honor, others jolly zest,

Some rich array; some said delights in bed,  
And many said to be a widow wed;  
Some others said that our hearts are most eased

870 When we are flattered and when we are pleased— 930  
And he was nigh the truth, if you ask me.  
A man shall win us best with flattery;

With much attendance, charm, and application  
Can we be caught, whatever be our station.

875 Some said our love to which we all aspire 935  
Is to be free to do as we desire,  
With no reproof of vice but with the rule

That men should say we’re wise, not one a fool.  
For truly there is none among us all  
880 Who, if a man should claw us on the gall, 940



Won't kick for being told the truth; he who  
 Does an assay will find out that it's true.  
 But though we may have vices kept within,  
 We like to be called wise and clean of sin.  
 And some say that we take the most delight  
 In keeping secrets, keeping our lips tight,  
 To just one purpose striving to adhere:  
 Not to betray one thing that we may hear.  
 That tale's not worth the handle of a rake.  
 We women can't keep secrets, heaven's sake!  
 Just look at Midas—would you hear the tale?  
 Ovid, among the trifles he'd detail,  
 Said Midas had long hair, for it appears  
 That on his head had grown two ass's ears.  
 This defect he had tried as best he might  
 To keep well as he could from others' sight,  
 And save his wife there was none who could tell.  
 He loved her much and trusted her as well  
 And prayed that not one living creature she  
 Would ever tell of his deformity.  
 She swore she'd not, though all the world to win,  
 Be guilty of such villainy and sin  
 And make her husband have so foul a name.  
 To tell it would as well bring her to shame.  
 But nonetheless she all but nearly died,  
 So long to have a secret she must hide.  
 She thought it swelled so sorely in her heart  
 Some word from out of her was bound to start;  
 And since she dared to tell it to no man,  
 Down close beside a marsh the lady ran—  
 She had to rush, her heart was so afire.  
 Then like a bittern booming in the mire,  
 She put her mouth down to the water, saying,  
 "Water, make no sound, don't be betraying,  
 For I will tell this to no one but you.  
 My husband has long ass's ears—it's true!"  
 She thought, "My heart is cured now, it is out;  
 I couldn't keep it longer, there's no doubt."  
 So as you see, we may awhile abide  
 But it must out, no secret we can hide.  
 (As for the tale, if you would hear the rest,  
 Read Ovid, for that's where you'll learn it best.)  
 This knight of whom my tale is all about,  
 When seeing that he couldn't find it out—  
 That is to say, what women love the most—  
 Felt in his breast already like a ghost;  
 For home he headed, he could not sojourn,  
 The day had come when homeward he must turn.  
 And in this woeful state he chanced to ride  
 While on his way along a forest side,  
 And there he saw upon the forest floor  
 Some ladies dancing, twenty-four or more.  
 Toward these dancers he was quick to turn  
 In hope that of some wisdom he might learn;  
 But all at once, before he'd gotten there,  
 The dancers disappeared, he knew not where.  
 He didn't see one creature bearing life,  
 Save sitting on the green one single wife.  
 An uglier creature no mind could devise.  
 To meet him this old wife was to arise,

And said, "You can't get there from here, Sir Knight.  
 What are you seeking, by your faith? It might  
 Well be to your advantage, sir, to tell;  
 Old folks like me know many things, and well."  
 945 "Dear mother," said the knight, "it is for sure 1005  
 That I am dead if I cannot secure  
 What thing it is that women most desire.  
 If you could teach me, gladly I would hire."  
 "Give me your word here in my hand," said she,  
 950 "The next thing I request you'll do for me 1010  
 If it's a thing that lies within your might,  
 And I will tell you then before it's night."  
 The knight said, "Here's my oath, I guarantee."  
 "Then certainly I dare to boast," said she,  
 955 "Your life is safe, for I'll be standing by; 1015  
 Upon my life, the queen will say as I.  
 Let's see who is the proudest of them all,  
 With kerchief or with headdress standing tall,  
 Who shall deny that which I have to teach.  
 960 Now let us go, no need to make a speech." 1020  
 She whispered then a message in his ear  
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.  
 When they had come to court, the knight declared,  
 "I've come back to the day, and to be spared,  
 965 For I am now prepared to give reply." 1025  
 The noble wives and maidens stood nearby,  
 And widows too (who were considered wise);  
 The queen sat like a justice in her guise.  
 All these had been assembled there to hear,  
 970 And then the knight was summoned to appear. 1030  
 Full silence was commanded in the court  
 So that the knight might openly report  
 The thing that worldly women love the best.  
 He stood not like a beast at one's behest  
 975 But quickly gave his answer loud and clear, 1035  
 With manly voice that all the court might hear.  
 "My liege and lady, generally," said he,  
 "What women most desire is sovereignty  
 Over their husbands or the ones they love,  
 980 To have the mastery, to be above. 1040  
 This is your most desire, though you may kill  
 Me if you wish. I'm here, do as you will."  
 No wife or maid or widow in the court  
 Saw fit to contradict the knight's report;  
 985 They all agreed, "He's worthy of his life." 1045  
 And with that word up started the old wife,  
 The one the knight had seen upon the green.  
 "Mercy," she said, "my sovereign lady queen!  
 Before your court departs, grant me my right.  
 990 It's I who taught this answer to the knight, 1050  
 For which he gave a solemn oath to me:  
 The first thing I request he'd do for me  
 If it's a thing that lies within his might.  
 Before the court I therefore pray, Sir Knight,"  
 995 She said, "that you will take me as your wife; 1055  
 For well you know that I have saved your life.  
 If I speak falsely, by your faith accuse me."  
 The knight replied, "Alas, how woes abuse me!  
 I know I made the promise you've expressed.  
 1000 For love of God, please choose a new request. 1060

Take all my goods and let my body go.”  
 “No, damn us both then!” she replied. “For though  
 I may be ugly, elderly, and poor,  
 I’d give all of the metal and the ore  
 That lies beneath the earth and lies above 1065  
 If only I could be your wife and love.”  
 “My love?” he said. “No, rather my damnation!  
 Alas! that there is any of my nation  
 Who ever could so foully be disgraced.”  
 But all for naught, the end was that he faced 1070  
 Constraint, for he now would have to wed  
 And take his gray old wife with him to bed.  
 Now there are some men who might say perhaps  
 That it’s my negligence or else a lapse  
 That I don’t tell you of the joyous way 1075  
 In which the feast took place that very day.  
 I’ll answer briefly should the question fall:  
 There wasn’t any joy or feast at all,  
 Just lots of sorrow, things went grievously.  
 He married her that morning privately,  
 Then all that day he hid just like an owl, 1080  
 So woeful, for his wife looked really foul.  
 Great was the woe the knight had in his head  
 When with his wife he’d been brought to the bed;  
 He tossed and then he turned both to and fro. 1085  
 His old wife lay there smiling at him, though,  
 And said, “Dear husband, benedicite!  
 Acts every knight toward his wife this way?  
 Is this the law of great King Arthur’s house?  
 Is every knight of his so distant? Spouse, 1090  
 I am your own true love and I’m your wife  
 And I’m the one as well who saved your life,  
 And I have never done you wrong or spite.  
 Why do you treat me so on our first night?  
 You act just like a man who’s lost his wit. 1095  
 What is my guilt? For God’s love, tell me it,  
 And it shall be amended if I may.”  
 “Amended?” asked the knight. “Whatever way?  
 There’s no way it could ever be amended.  
 You are so old and loathsome—and descended,  
 To add to that, from such a lowly kind—  
 No wonder that I toss and turn and wind.  
 I wish to God my heart would burst, no less!”  
 “Is this,” she said, “the cause of your distress?”  
 “Why, yes,” said he, “and is there any wonder?” 1105  
 She said, “I could amend the stress you’re under,  
 If you desire, within the next three days,  
 If you’ll treat me more kindly in your ways.  
 “But when you talk about gentility  
 Like old wealth handed down a family tree,  
 That this is what makes of you gentlemen,  
 Such arrogance I judge not worth a hen.  
 Take him who’s always virtuous in his acts  
 In public and in private, who exacts  
 Of himself all the noble deeds he can, 1115  
 And there you’ll find the greatest gentleman.  
 Christ wills we claim nobility from him,  
 Not from our elders or the wealth of them;  
 For though they give us all their heritage  
 And we claim noble birth by parentage, 1120

They can’t bequeath—all else theirs for the giving—  
 To one of us the virtuous way of living  
 That made the nobles they were known to be,  
 The way they bade us live in like degree.  
 “How well the poet wise, the Florentine 1125  
 Named Dante, speaks about just what I mean,  
 And this is how he rhymes it in his story:  
 ‘Of men who climb their family trees for glory,  
 Few will excel, for it is by God’s grace  
 We gain nobility and not by race.’ 1130  
 No, from our elders all that we can claim  
 Are temporal things such as may hurt and maim.  
 “All know as I, that if gentility  
 Were something that was planted naturally  
 Through all a certain lineage down the line, 1135  
 In private and in public they’d be fine  
 And noble people doing what is nice,  
 Completely free of villainy and vice.  
 “Take fire into the darkest house or hut  
 Between here and Mount Caucasus, then shut 1140  
 The doors, and all men leave and not return;  
 That fire will still remain as if the burn  
 Were being watched by twenty thousand souls.  
 Its function will not cease, its nature holds,  
 On peril of my life, until it dies. 1145  
 “Gentility, you then should realize,  
 Is not akin to things like property;  
 For people act with much variety,  
 Not like the fire that always is the same.  
 God knows that men may often find, for shame, 1150  
 A lord’s son who’s involved in villainy.  
 Who prides himself to have gentility  
 Because it happens he’s of noble birth,  
 With elders virtuous, of noble worth,  
 But never tries to do a noble deed 1155  
 Nor follow in his dead ancestors’ lead,  
 Is not a noble, be he duke or earl;  
 For bad and sinful deeds just make a churl.  
 Sir, your gentility is but the fame  
 Of your ancestors, who earned their good name 1160  
 With qualities quite foreign to your own.  
 Gentility can come from God alone,  
 So true gentility’s a thing of grace,  
 Not something that’s bequeathed by rank or place.  
 “For nobleness, as says Valerius, 1165  
 Consider Tullius Hostilius:  
 Though poor, he rose to noble heights. Look in  
 Boethius or Seneca, and when  
 You do, don’t doubt the truth of what you read:  
 The noble is the man of noble deed. 1170  
 And so, dear husband, thus I will conclude:  
 If it’s true my ancestors were so rude,  
 Yet may the Lord, as I do hope, grant me  
 The grace to live my life most virtuously;  
 For I’m a noble when I so begin 1175  
 To live in virtue and avoid sin.  
 “For poverty you scold me. By your leave,  
 The God on high, in whom we both believe,  
 Chose willfully to live a poor man’s life;  
 And surely every man, maiden, or wife 1180

Can understand that Jesus, heaven's King,  
 Would not choose sinful living. It's a thing  
 Of honor to be poor without despair,  
 As Seneca and other clerks declare.  
 To be poor yet contented, I assert,  
 1185 Is to be rich, though having not a shirt.  
 The one who covets is the poorer man,  
 For he would have that which he never can;  
 But he who doesn't have and doesn't crave  
 Is rich, though you may hold him but a knave.  
 1190 True poverty's been sung of properly;  
 As Juvenal said of it, 'Merrily  
 The poor man, as he goes upon his way,  
 In front of every thief can sing and play.'  
 It is a hateful good and, as I guess,  
 1195 A great promoter of industriousness.  
 A source of greater wisdom it can be  
 For one who learns to bear it patiently.  
 Though it seem wearisome, poverty is  
 Possession none will take from you as his.  
 1200 Poverty often makes a fellow know  
 Himself as well as God when he is low.  
 Poverty is an eyeglass, I contend,  
 Through which a man can see a truthful friend.  
 I bring no harm at all to you, therefore  
 1205 Do not reprove me, sire, for being poor.  
 "For being old you've also fussed at me;  
 Yet surely, sire, though no authority  
 Were in a book, you gentlemen select  
 Say men should treat an elder with respect  
 1210 And call him father, by your courtesy.  
 I think I could find authors who agree.  
 "If I am old and ugly, as you've said,  
 Of cuckoldry you needn't have a dread;  
 For filthiness and age, as I may thrive,  
 1215 Are guards that keep one's chastity alive.  
 But nonetheless, since I know your delight,  
 I shall fulfill your worldly appetite.  
 "Choose now," she said, "one of these two: that I  
 Be old and ugly till the day I die,  
 1220 And be to you a true and humble wife,  
 One never to displease you all your life;  
 Or if you'd rather, have me young and fair,  
 And take your chance on those who will repair  
 To your house now and then because of me  
 1225 (Or to some other place, it may well be).  
 Choose for yourself the one you'd rather try."  
 The knight gave it some thought, then gave a sigh,  
 And finally answered as you are to hear:  
 "My lady and my love and wife so dear,  
 1230 I leave to your wise governance the measure;  
 You choose which one would give the fullest pleasure  
 And honor to you, and to me as well.  
 I don't care which you do, you best can tell.  
 What you desire is good enough for me."  
 1235 "You've given me," she said, "the mastery?  
 The choice is mine and all's at my behest?"  
 "Yes, surely, wife," said he, "I think it best."  
 "Then kiss me, we'll no longer fight," she said,  
 "For you've my oath that I'll be both instead—  
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