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 cursed 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.

And where in any age can it be said
That God on high forebade 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,
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.

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
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.

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,
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.

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
Would chaste remain till both their lives were through.)

“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

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,
Some this, some that, as heaven has ordained.

“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
And thereby follow him; no, this was for
The ones desiring to live perfectly—
And by your leave, my lords, that isn’t me.

http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/wifepro.html
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
Was many a man by Jesus nourished well.
And yet with barley bread, as Mark can tell,
They’re bread from finest wheat, so be it said.
I don’t begrudge them their virginity;
Has also lived in perfect chastity.
And many a saint since this world first began
Christ was a virgin though shaped as a man,
Lest chastity be held a worthless thing.
Must go and use it for engendering,
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.

“The Pardoner spoke up immediately.

The Wife Continues

No, you’ll be drinking from another tun,
Before I’m through, that tastes much worse than ale.
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)—
Then make your choice whether you would sip
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,
By him shall other men corrected be.’
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
Tell us your tale and do not spare a man
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,
Will not be too upset by what I say,
For my intent is nothing but to play.

“My lords, I now will offer you my tale.
If ever I may drink of wine or ale,
I’ll tell the truth on husbands that I’ve had,
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
The contract binding them. By God above,
You know exactly what I’m speaking of.
So help me God, I laugh to think, all right,
How pitifully I made them work all night,
How pitifully I made them work all night,
Though, by my faith, it meant not much to me;
They gave me so much of their treasury
I didn’t need to practice diligence
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.
The woman’s wise who’s busy till she’s won
The love she wants, or she’ll be left with none.
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,
Unless it were for profit and for ease?
But by my faith, I worked them for so long
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
To bring me back some nice things from the fair,
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,
How you should speak: accuse them out of hand.

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!

http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/wifepro.html
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 hightborn, 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,
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, benedicte!
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;
But menfolk never test their wives, you say,
Till they are wed—old dotard, ne’er do well!—
And then we show our vices, so you tell.
“And it displease me, you also say,
If you don’t praise my beauty all the day
And aren’t forever pining on my face
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
My nurse and chambermaid, nor deem select
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—
And by the fact he signifies where I go,
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
You this, your property is mine as well.
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;
You’ll forgo one, I tell you to your eye.
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,
For I know you to be a good wife, Alice.”
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,
Who wrote this proverb in his Almagest:
“He has much higher wisdom than the rest
Who doesn’t care who has the world in hand.”
By this proverb you should understand
That if you have enough, why should you care
How merrily some other people fare?
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;
He’d have no less light than he did before.
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;
To back up what you say, you quote to me
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
Like pearls and gold, nor other rich array.”
About your text and rubric, let me say
http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/wifepro.html

I’d follow them as much as would a gnat.
“You also say that I am like a cat,
For if somebody singes 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?
“Also you 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;
For profit all his lust I so endured
And feigned for him a lusty appetite;
For still you preach of patient Job and such.
And have a good man’s conscience, as so much
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,
For there’s no doubt that one of us must cease;
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?
Why, take it all, here, take it every bit.
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.

You are to blame, by God, and that’s the truth.’
“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,
And I was young and wanton, passionate,
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!
Metellius, that dirty churl, the swine,
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,
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 cokkes 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."

"It so befell that one time during Lent,
As often to this close friend's house I went
And strive to be as merry as before.
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.

"Of husband number five I now will tell.
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 privity.

"It so befell that one time during Lent,
As often to this close friend's house I went
And strive to be as merry as before.
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.

"Of husband number five I now will tell.
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 privity.

"It so befell that one time during Lent,
As often to this close friend's house I went
And strive to be as merry as before.
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.

"Of husband number five I now will tell.
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 privity.
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 didn’t care, just so he pleased me,
How poor he was or what was his degree.

http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/wifepro.html
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.

“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.
He left out not a whit about the woe
That women here expressly you may find
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 told me, too, the circumstance that led
Amphiaraus at Thebes to lose his life;
My husband had a legend of his wife
Eryphile, 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
While they were sleeping, that’s how they were slain.
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.

‘It’s better that your dwelling place,’ said he,
‘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.

Each wicked and contrary to her spouse,
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,
Is like a golden ring in a sow’s nose.’

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 cursed book all night,
Three leaves all of a sudden I tore right
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
And with his fist he hit me in the head,
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.

‘O false thief, have you slain me?’ then I spoke.
‘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,
So help me God, I’d never hit my dame;
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.

‘I can no longer speak, I’m nearly dead.’

“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,
And of his tongue and hands as well—and when
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,
Do as you please the balance of your life;
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,

So help me God, and he was so to me.
I pray that God who sits in majesty

http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/wifepro.html
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.”

“No, 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 
This land was filled with fairies all about. 
Who, if a man should claw us on the gall, 
For truly there is none among us all 
That men should say we’re wise, not one a fool. 
With no reproof of vice but with the rule 
Is to be free to do as we desire, 
Some said our love to which we all aspire 
Can we be caught, whatever be our station. 
When we are flattered and when we are pleased— 
And he was nigh the truth, if you ask me. 
Some said our love to which we all aspire 
Is to be free to do as we desire, 
With much attendance, charm, and application 
Some others said that our hearts are most eased 
When we are flattered and when we are pleased— 
For truly there is none among us all 
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.

In hopes he could secure the promised grace 
He sought in every house and every place 
To come back when his year was at its close 
To go away was what he finally chose, 
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, 
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. 
He sought in every house and every place 
In hopes he could secure the promised grace 
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. 
Some said that women all love riches best, 
While some said honor, others jolly zest, 
Some said that women all love riches best, 
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.

Oh, by my faith, 
This knight was all but numbered with the dead 
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, 
King Arthur spared him for at least a space; 
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. 
I want your word before you take a pace: 
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, 
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. 
He sought in every house and every place 
In hopes he could secure the promised grace 
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. 
Some said that women all love riches best, 
While some said honor, others jolly zest, 
Some said that women all love riches best, 
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.

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

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.”

“No, 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 he could find two people on the matter 
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter. 
Some said that women all love riches best, 
While some said honor, others jolly zest, 
Some said that women all love riches best, 
Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.
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
So long to have a secret she must hide.
   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."
"Dear mother," said the knight, "it is for sure
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,
"The next thing I request you'll do for me
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,
"Your life is safe, for I'll be standing by;
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.
Now let us go, no need to make a speech."
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,
For I am now prepared to give reply."
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,
And then the knight was summoned to appear.
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
But quickly gave his answer loud and clear,
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,
To have the mastery, to be above.
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;
They all agreed, "He's worthy of his life."
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.
It's I who taught this answer to the knight,
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,"
She said, "that you will take me as your wife;
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.
For love of God, please choose a new request.
http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/wifepro.html
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 the metal and the ore
That lies beneath the earth and lies above
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 fouly be disgrac’d.”

But all for naught, the end was that he faced
Constrainment, 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
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,
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.
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 cause of your distress?”
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,
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,

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
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.’

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,
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
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.

“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,
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
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
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,
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.
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
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
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,  
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.

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,  
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.  
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  
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  
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,  
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,  
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  
(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,  
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.”

“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—

That is to say, I’ll be both good and fair.  
I pray to God I die in mad despair  
Unless I am to you as good and true  
As any wife since this old world was new.

Come dawn, if I’m not as fair to be seen  
As any lady, empress, any queen  
Who ever lived between the east and west,  
Then take my life or do whatever’s best.

Lift up the curtains now, see how it is.”

And when the knight had truly seen all this,  
How she was young and fair in all her charms,  
In utter joy he took her in his arms;  
His heart was bathing in a bath of bliss,  
A thousand kisses he began to kiss,  
And she obeyed in each and every way,  
Whatever was his pleasure or his play.

And so they lived, till their lives’ very end,  
In perfect joy. And may Christ Jesus send  
Us husbands meek and young and fresh abed,  
And then the grace to outlive those we wed;  
I also pray that Jesus shorten lives  
Of those who won’t be governed by their wives;  
As for old niggards angered by expense,  
God send them soon a mighty pestilence!