

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. 40
God knows, this noble king, if I am right,
Had many a merry bout on that first night
5 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, 44 A
Both for their hanging purse and for their chest.
As many different schools make perfect clerks,
10 So practice that’s diverse in sundry works
Will make a perfect workman certainly;
Five-husband schooling’s done the same for me. 44F
The sixth is welcome when he comes along; 45
I won’t be keeping myself chaste for long,
15 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. 50
It’s no sin to be married, he has said,
20 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, 55
And Jacob, too, as far as that may go,
25 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 forbade that we be wed 60
By any word express? Please answer me.
30 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, 65
A woman may be counseled to be pure,
35 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; 70

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: 75
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 80
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. 90
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.)
 "I grant it well, but envy I do not, 95
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? 100
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, 105
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 110
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, 115
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, 120
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.
85 That learned men I not provoke to oath, 125
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? 130
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.
95 "But I don't say that everyone possessing 135
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 140
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.
105 And yet with barley bread, as Mark can tell, 145
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
110 As freely as my Maker has it sent. 150

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,
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, 190
Will not be too upset by what I say,
For my intent is nothing but to play.

The Wife Continues

155 "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, 195
As three of them were good and two were bad.
The three men who were good were rich and old,
160 Indeed were scarcely able to uphold
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;
165 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.
170 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,
175 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.
180 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,
And glad when I would speak with pleasant air,
For God knows I would chide them spitefully.
185 "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 230
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? 240
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. 245
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 250
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 255
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, 260
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 265
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. 270
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. 275
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! 280
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, 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 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
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—
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
 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."
 And 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
 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,
Once I could feel his arm upon my side,
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,
And no hawk by an empty hand is lured.
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.
For even had the pope sat down beside
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
I'd owe them not a word that's not repaid.
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,
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,
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,
400 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?
405 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.
410 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.
415 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!
420 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,
425 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, 470
 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. 475
 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. 480
 “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, 485
 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. 490
 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. 500
 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, 510
 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— 515
 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. 520
 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. 530
 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, 535
 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. 540
 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 545
 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. As wives must do (the custom of the land),
 My husband was in London all that Lent, 550 And hid my face with the kerchief in my hand. 590
 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 555 With our clerk Jenkin being one. As God 595
 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, 560 He was, I think, then twenty winters old, 600
 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, 565 So help me God, I was a lusty one 605
 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 570 Is full of Mars; for Venus did impart 610
 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, 580 (And also in another, private place). 620
 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? 585 I didn't care, just so he pleased me, 625
 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,
 "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.

And then he'd go and search his Bible through

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:

'Whoever builds his house by using shallows

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

For all his proverbs or for his old saw.

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,

But I would not forbear in any case.

“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

630 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,

635 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

640 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,

645 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

650 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,

655 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,

660 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,

665 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.

710 For Livia, one evening very late,

750

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

715 That he was dead before the morning sun.

755

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

720 On which, he said, his wives (who numbered three)

760

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.’

725 “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

730 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.

735 ‘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.

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,

745 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,

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

Will bless his soul for all his mercy dear.

Now I will tell my tale if you will hear.”

Another Interruption

790 The Friar laughed when he had heard all this.

He said, “If ever I have joy or bliss, 830

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!

795 See how a meddling friar ever swarms.

A fly and friar, good men, will fall into 835

Each dish, into all kinds of matter. You

Speak of preambulation? Amble or

Go trot, shut up, or go sit down! No more,

800 You’re spoiling all our fun, the way you act.”

The Friar said, “Summoner, is that a fact? 840

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.”

805 “Now, Friar, damn your bloody eyes and face!”

The Summoner said. “And damn myself as well 845

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,

810 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.”

815 “I’m ready, sir,” she said, “as you request,

With license from this worthy Friar here.” 855

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

The Wife of Bath’s Tale

820

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 860

825 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,

<p>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—</p>	<p>945 That is to say, what women love the most— 985 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 950 While on his way along a forest side, 990 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; 955 But all at once, before he'd gotten there, 995 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. 960 To meet him this old wife was to arise, 1000 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." 965 "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, 970 "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, 975 "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. 980 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,</p>
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For I am now prepared to give reply.” 1025 That lies beneath the earth and lies above 1065
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. 1030 But all for naught, the end was that he faced 1070
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, 1035 That I don’t tell you of the joyous way 1075
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. 1040 He married her that morning privately, 1080
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.” 1045 He tossed and then he turned both to and fro. 1085
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, 1050 Is every knight of his so distant? Spouse, 1090
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; 1055 You act just like a man who’s lost his wit. 1095
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. 1060 You are so old and loathsome—and descended, 1100
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
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?” On peril of my life, until it dies. 1145

She said, “I could amend the stress you’re under, “Gentility, you then should realize, 1145

If you desire, within the next three days, Is not akin to things like property;

If you’ll treat me more kindly in your ways. For people act with much variety,

“But when you talk about gentility Not like the fire that always is the same.

Like old wealth handed down a family tree, 1110 God knows that men may often find, for shame, 1150

That this is what makes of you gentlemen, A lord’s son who’s involved in villainy.

Such arrogance I judge not worth a hen. Who prides himself to have gentility

Take him who’s always virtuous in his acts Because it happens he’s of noble birth,

In public and in private, who exacts With elders virtuous, of noble worth,

Of himself all the noble deeds he can, 1115 But never tries to do a noble deed 1155

And there you’ll find the greatest gentleman. Nor follow in his dead ancestors’ lead,

Christ wills we claim nobility from him, Is not a noble, be he duke or earl;

Not from our elders or the wealth of them; For bad and sinful deeds just make a churl.

For though they give us all their heritage Sir, your gentility is but the fame

And we claim noble birth by parentage, 1120 Of your ancestors, who earned their good name 1160

They can’t bequeath—all else theirs for the giving— With qualities quite foreign to your own.

To one of us the virtuous way of living Gentility can come from God alone,

That made the nobles they were known to be, So true gentility’s a thing of grace,

The way they bade us live in like degree. Not something that’s bequeathed by rank or place.

“How well the poet wise, the Florentine 1125 “For nobleness, as says Valerius, 1165

Named **Dante**, speaks about just what I mean, Consider Tullius Hostilius:

And this is how he rhymes it in his story: Though poor, he rose to noble heights. Look in

‘Of men who climb their family trees for glory, Boethius or Seneca, and when

Few will excel, for it is by God’s grace You do, don’t doubt the truth of what you read:

We gain nobility and not by race.’ 1130 The noble is the man of noble deed. 1170

No, from our elders all that we can claim And so, dear husband, thus I will conclude:

Are temporal things such as may hurt and maim. If it’s true my ancestors were so rude,

“All know as I, that if gentility Yet may the Lord, as I do hope, grant me

Were something that was planted naturally The grace to live my life most virtuously;

Through all a certain lineage down the line, 1135 For I’m a noble when I so begin 1175

In private and in public they’d be fine To live in virtue and avoid sin.

And noble people doing what is nice, “For poverty you scold me. By your leave,

Completely free of villainy and vice. The God on high, in whom we both believe,

“Take fire into the darkest house or hut Chose willfully to live a poor man’s life;

Between here and Mount Caucasus, then shut 1140 And surely every man, maiden, or wife 1180

The doors, and all men leave and not return; Can understand that Jesus, heaven’s King,

That fire will still remain as if the burn Would not choose sinful living. It’s a thing

Were being watched by twenty thousand souls. Of honor to be poor without despair,

Its function will not cease, its nature holds, As Seneca and other clerks declare.

To be poor yet contented, I assert,	1185	To your house now and then because of me	1225
Is to be rich, though having not a shirt.		(Or to some other place, it may well be).	
The one who covets is the poorer man,		Choose for yourself the one you'd rather try."	
For he would have that which he never can;		The knight gave it some thought, then gave a sigh,	
But he who doesn't have and doesn't crave		And finally answered as you are to hear:	
Is rich, though you may hold him but a knave.	1190	"My lady and my love and wife so dear,	1230
True poverty's been sung of properly;		I leave to your wise governance the measure;	
As Juvenal said of it, 'Merrily		You choose which one would give the fullest pleasure	
The poor man, as he goes upon his way,		And honor to you, and to me as well.	
In front of every thief can sing and play.'		I don't care which you do, you best can tell.	
It is a hateful good and, as I guess,	1195	What you desire is good enough for me."	1235
A great promoter of industriousness.		"You've given me," she said, "the mastery?	
A source of greater wisdom it can be		The choice is mine and all's at my behest?"	
For one who learns to bear it patiently.		"Yes, surely, wife," said he, "I think it best."	
Though it seem wearisome, poverty is		"Then kiss me, we'll no longer fight," she said,	
Possession none will take from you as his.	1200	"For you've my oath that I'll be both instead—	1240
Poverty often makes a fellow know		That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.	
Himself as well as God when he is low.		I pray to God I die in mad despair	
Poverty is an eyeglass, I contend,		Unless I am to you as good and true	
Through which a man can see a truthful friend.		As any wife since this old world was new.	
I bring no harm at all to you, therefore	1205	Come dawn, if I'm not as fair to be seen	1245
Do not reprove me, sire, for being poor.		As any lady, empress, any queen	
"For being old you've also fussed at me;		Who ever lived between the east and west,	
Yet surely, sire, though no authority		Then take my life or do whatever's best.	
Were in a book, you gentlemen select		Lift up the curtains now, see how it is."	
Say men should treat an elder with respect	1210	And when the knight had truly seen all this,	1250
And call him father, by your courtesy.		How she was young and fair in all her charms,	
I think I could find authors who agree.		In utter joy he took her in his arms;	
"If I am old and ugly, as you've said,		His heart was bathing in a bath of bliss,	
Of cuckoldry you needn't have a dread;		A thousand kisses he began to kiss,	
For filthiness and age, as I may thrive,	1215	And she obeyed in each and every way,	1255
Are guards that keep one's chastity alive.		Whatever was his pleasure or his play.	
But nonetheless, since I know your delight,		And so they lived, till their lives' very end,	
I shall fulfill your worldly appetite.		In perfect joy. And may Christ Jesus send	
"Choose now," she said, "one of these two: that I		Us husbands meek and young and fresh abed,	
Be old and ugly till the day I die,	1220	And then the grace to outlive those we wed;	1260
And be to you a true and humble wife,		I also pray that Jesus shorten lives	
One never to displease you all your life;		Of those who won't be governed by their wives;	
Or if you'd rather, have me young and fair,		As for old niggards angered by expense,	
And take your chance on those who will repair		God send them soon a mighty pestilence!	