

General Prologue

At the Tabard Inn, a tavern in Southwark, near London, the narrator joins a company of twenty-nine pilgrims. The pilgrims, like the narrator, are traveling to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator gives a descriptive account of twenty-seven of these pilgrims, including a Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant, Clerk, Man of Law, Franklin, Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Weaver, Cook, Shipman, Physician, Wife, Parson, Plowman, Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, and Host. (He does not describe the Second Nun or the Nun's Priest, although both characters appear later in the book.) The Host, whose name, we find out in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, is Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He decides that each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. Whomever he judges to be the best storyteller will receive a meal at Bailey's tavern, courtesy of the other pilgrims. The pilgrims draw lots and determine that the Knight will tell the first tale.

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

The Host asks the Monk to tell the next tale, but the drunken Miller interrupts and insists that his tale should be the next. He tells the story of an impoverished student named Nicholas, who persuades his landlord's sexy young wife, Alisoun, to spend the night with him. He convinces his landlord, a carpenter named John, that the second flood is coming, and tricks him into spending the night in a tub hanging from the ceiling of his barn. Absolon, a young parish clerk who is also in love with Alisoun, appears outside the window of the room where Nicholas and Alisoun lie together. When Absolon begs Alisoun for a kiss, she sticks her rear end out the window in the dark and lets him kiss it. Absolon runs and gets a red-hot poker, returns to the window, and asks for another kiss; when Nicholas sticks his bottom out the window and farts, Absolon brands him on the buttocks. Nicholas's cries for water make the carpenter think that the flood has come, so the carpenter cuts the rope connecting his tub to the ceiling, falls down, and breaks his arm.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

The Wife of Bath gives a lengthy account of her feelings about marriage. Quoting from the Bible, the Wife argues against those who believe it is wrong to marry more than once, and she explains how she dominated and controlled each of her five husbands. She married her fifth husband, Jankyn, for love instead of money. After the Wife has rambled on for a while, the Friar butts in to complain that she is taking too long, and the Summoner retorts that friars are like flies, always meddling. The Friar promises to tell a tale about a summoner, and the Summoner promises to tell a tale about a friar. The Host cries for everyone to quiet down and allow the Wife to commence her tale.

In her tale, a young knight of King Arthur's court rapes a maiden; to atone for his crime, Arthur's queen sends him on a quest to discover what women want most. An ugly old woman promises the knight that she will tell him the secret if he promises to do whatever she wants for saving his life. He agrees, and she tells him women want control of their husbands and their own lives. They go together to Arthur's queen, and the old woman's answer turns out to be correct. The old woman then tells the knight that he must marry her. When the knight confesses later that he is repulsed by her appearance, she gives him a choice: she can either be ugly and faithful, or beautiful and unfaithful. The knight tells her to make the choice herself, and she rewards him for giving her control of the marriage by rendering herself both beautiful *and* faithful.

Preamble

When fair April with his showers sweet,
Has pierced the drought of March to the root's feet
And bathed each vein in liquid of such power,
Its strength creates the newly springing flower;

When the West Wind too, with his sweet breath,
Has breathed new life - in every copse and heath -
Into each tender shoot, and the young sun
From Aries moves to Taurus on his run,
And those small birds begin their melody,
(The ones who 'sleep' all night with open eye,)
Then nature stirs them up to such a pitch
That folk all long to go on pilgrimage

And wandering travellers tread new shores, strange strands,
Seek out far shrines, renowned in many lands,
And specially from every shire's end
Of England to Canterbury they wend
The holy blessed martyr there to seek,
Who has brought health to them when they were sick.

It happened in that season that one day
In Southwark, at the Tabard, where I lay
Ready to travel to that holy site -
To Canterbury, with my spirits bright,
There came at evening to that hostelry
A group of twenty-nine, a company
Of various folk, to new found friendship come
By happy chance - and pilgrims every one
That for the Canterbury shrine were bound.

The bedrooms and the stables were well found.
There for our comfort was none but the best.
And briefly, when the sun had sunk to rest,
Since I spoke to them all in a friendly way,
I was quite soon 'one of the crowd' you might say.
We planned next day to be ready to go
At first light; to where, you already know.

Nevertheless, while I have space and time,
Before I go further in this tale of mine,
I feel the most natural thing to do,
Is to picture each of this group for you,
To tell you how they all appeared to me -
What sort they were and what rank they might be,
And what they wore, the clothes they were dressed in;
And first then with a knight I shall begin.

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
(That slepen al the nyght with open eye)
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages

And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.

Bifil that in that seson, on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At nyght was come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felawshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.

The chambres and the stables weren wyde,
And wel we weren esed atte beste.
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon,
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
And made forward erly for to ryse
To take our wey, ther as I yow devyse.

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me -
And whiche they weren and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

The Pilgrims

The Narrator - The narrator makes it quite clear that he is also a character in his book. Although he is called Chaucer, we should be wary of accepting his words and opinions as Chaucer's own. In the General Prologue, the narrator presents himself as a gregarious and naïve character. Later on, the Host accuses him of being silent and sullen. Because the narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory, whom he does and does not like, and what he chooses and chooses not to remember about the characters, tells us as much about the narrator's own prejudices as it does about the characters themselves.

The Knight - The first pilgrim Chaucer describes in the General Prologue, and the teller of the first tale. The Knight represents the ideal of a medieval Christian man-at-arms. He has participated in no less than fifteen of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him.

The Wife of Bath - Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman's husband. Though she is a seamstress by occupation, she seems to be a professional wife. She has been married five times and had many other affairs in her youth, making her well practiced in the art of love. She presents herself as someone who loves marriage and sex, but, from what we see of her, she also takes pleasure in rich attire, talking, and arguing. She is deaf in one ear and has a gap between her front teeth, which was considered attractive in Chaucer's time. She has traveled on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and elsewhere in Europe as well.

The Pardoner - Pardoners granted papal indulgences—reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves. In fact, Chaucer's Pardoner excels in fraud, carrying a bag full of fake relics—for example, he claims to have the veil of the Virgin Mary. The Pardoner has long, greasy, yellow hair and is beardless. These characteristics were associated with shiftiness and gender ambiguity in Chaucer's time. The Pardoner also has a gift for singing and preaching whenever he finds himself inside a church.

The Miller - Stout and brawny, the Miller has a wart on his nose and a big mouth, both literally and figuratively. He threatens the Host's notion of propriety when he drunkenly insists on telling the second tale. Indeed, the Miller seems to enjoy overturning all conventions: he ruins the Host's carefully planned storytelling order; he rips doors off hinges; and he tells a tale that is somewhat blasphemous, ridiculing religious clerks, scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.

The Prioress - Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress (a nun who is head of her convent) aspires to have exquisite taste. Her table manners are dainty, she knows French (though not the French of the court), she dresses well, and she is charitable and compassionate.

The Monk - Most monks of the Middle Ages lived in monasteries according to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which demanded that they devote their lives to "work and prayer." This Monk cares little for the Rule; his devotion is to hunting and eating. He is large, loud, and well clad in hunting boots and furs.

The Friar - Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were a great object of criticism in Chaucer's time. Always ready to befriend young women or rich men who might need his services, the friar actively administers the sacraments in his town, especially those of marriage and confession. However, Chaucer's worldly Friar has taken to accepting bribes.

The Summoner - The Summoner brings persons accused of violating Church law to ecclesiastical court. This Summoner is a lecherous man whose face is scarred by leprosy. He gets drunk frequently, is irritable, and is not particularly qualified for his position. He spouts the few words of Latin he knows in an attempt to sound educated.

The Host - Harry Bailey - The leader of the group, the Host is large, loud, and merry, although he possesses a quick temper. He mediates among the pilgrims and facilitates the flow of the tales. His title of "host" may be a pun, suggesting both an innkeeper and the Eucharist, or Holy Host.

The Parson - The only devout churchman in the company, the Parson lives in poverty, but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The pastor of a sizable town, he preaches the Gospel and makes sure to practice what he preaches. He is everything that the Monk, the Friar, and the Pardoner are not.

The Squire - The Knight's son and apprentice. The Squire is curly-haired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting.

The Clerk - The Clerk is a poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, he is threadbare and wan. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are wise and full of moral virtue.

The Man of Law - A successful lawyer commissioned by the king. He upholds justice in matters large and small and knows every statute of England's law by heart.

The Manciple - A manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, this Manciple is smarter than the thirty lawyers he feeds.

The Merchant - The Merchant trades in furs and other cloths, mostly from Flanders. He is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer's society.

The Shipman - Brown-skinned from years of sailing, the Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, and exotic ports in Spain and Carthage as well. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship's captain sleeps.

The Physician - The Physician is one of the best in his profession, for he knows the cause of every malady and can cure most of them. Though the Physician keeps himself in perfect physical health, the narrator calls into question the Physician's spiritual health: he rarely consults the Bible and has an unhealthy love of financial gain.

The Franklin - The word "franklin" means "free man." In Chaucer's society, a franklin was neither a vassal serving a lord nor a member of the nobility. This particular franklin is a connoisseur of food and wine, so much so that his table remains laid and ready for food all day.

The Reeve - A reeve was similar to a steward of a manor, and this reeve performs his job shrewdly—his lord never loses so much as a ram to the other employees, and the vassals under his command are kept in line. However, he steals from his master.

The Plowman - The Plowman is the Parson's brother and is equally good-hearted. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life.

The Guildsmen - Listed together, the five Guildsmen appear as a unit. English guilds were a combination of labor unions and social fraternities: craftsmen of similar occupations joined together to increase their bargaining power and live communally. All five Guildsmen are clad in the livery of their brotherhood.

The Cook - The Cook works for the Guildsmen. Chaucer gives little detail about him, although he mentions a crusty sore on the Cook's leg.

The Yeoman - The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The narrator mentions that his dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester.

The Second Nun - The Second Nun is not described in the General Prologue, but she tells a saint's life for her tale.

The Nun's Priest - Like the Second Nun, the Nun's Priest is not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.

Recommended:

The Pardoner's Tale

The Three Rioters - These are the three protagonists of the Pardoner's Tale. All three indulge in and represent the vices against which the Pardoner has railed in his Prologue: Gluttony, Drunkenness, Gambling, and Swearing. These traits define the three and eventually lead to their downfall. The Rioters at first appear like personified vices, but it is their belief that a personified concept—in this case, Death—is a real person that becomes the root cause of their undoing.

The Old Man - In the Pardoner's Tale, the three Rioters encounter a very old man whose body is completely covered except for his face. Before the old man tells the Rioters where they can find "Death," one of the Rioters rashly demands why the old man is still alive. The old man answers that he is doomed to walk the earth for eternity. He has been interpreted as Death itself, or as Cain, punished for fratricide by walking the earth forever; or as the Wandering Jew, a man who refused to let Christ rest at his house when Christ proceeded to his crucifixion, and who was therefore doomed to roam the world, through the ages, never finding rest.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Chanticleer - The heroic rooster of the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chanticleer has seven hen-wives and is the most handsome cock in the barnyard. One day, he has a prophetic dream of a fox that will carry him away. Chanticleer is also a bit vain about his clear and accurate crowing voice, and he unwittingly allows a fox to flatter him out of his liberty.

Pertelote - Chanticleer's favorite wife in the Nun's Priest's Tale. She is his equal in looks, manners, and talent. When Chanticleer dreams of the fox, he awakens her in the middle of the night, begging for an interpretation, but Pertelote will have none of it, calling him foolish. When the fox takes him away, she mourns him in classical Greek fashion, burning herself and wailing.

The Fox - The orange fox, interpreted by some as an allegorical figure for the devil, catches Chanticleer the rooster through flattery. Eventually, Chanticleer outwits the fox by encouraging him to boast of his deceit to his pursuers. When the fox opens his mouth, Chanticleer escapes.

Wife of Bath description

There was a WIFE of BATH, or a near city,
Who was somewhat deaf, it is a pity.
At making clothes she had a skillful hand

450
She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.
In all the parish there was no wife to go
And proceed her in offering, it is so;
And if one did, indeed, so angry was she
It put her out of all her charity.

455
Her head-dresses were of finest weave and ground;
I dare swear that they weighed about ten pound
Which, on a Sunday, she wore on her head.
Her stockings were of the finest scarlet red,
Tightly fastened, and her shoes were soft and new.

460
Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.
She'd been respectable throughout her life,
Married in church, husbands she had five,
Not counting other company in youth;
But thereof there's no need to speak, in truth.

465
Three times she'd travelled to Jerusalem;
And many a foreign stream she'd had to stem;
At Rome she'd been, and she'd been in Boulogne,
In Spain at Santiago, and at Cologne.
She could tell much of wandering by the way:

470
Gap-toothed was she, it is the truth I say.
Upon a pacing horse easily she sat,
Wearing a large wimple, and over all a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a targe;
An overskirt was tucked around her buttocks large,

475
And her feet spurred sharply under that.
In company well could she laugh and chat.
The remedies of love she knew, perchance,
For of that art she'd learned the old, old dance.



Wife of Bath Prologue

"Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, were good enough for me,
To speak of woe that is in all marriage;
For, masters, since I was twelve years of age,

5
Thanks be to God who is forever alive,
Of husbands at church door have I had five;
For men so many times have married me;
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But someone told me not so long ago

10
That since Our Lord, save once, would never go
To wedding that at Cana in Galilee,
Thus, by this same example, showed he me
I never should have married more than once.
Lo and behold! What sharp words, for the nonce,

15
Beside a well Lord Jesus, God and man,
Spoke in reproving the Samaritan:
"For thou hast had five husbands," thus said he,
"And he whom thou hast now to be with thee
Is not thine husband." Thus he said that day,

20
But what he meant thereby I cannot say;
And I would ask now why that same fifth man
Was not husband to the Samaritan?
How many might she have, then, in marriage?
For I have never heard, in all my age,

25
Clear exposition of this number shown,
Though men may guess and argue up and down.
But well I know and say, and do not lie,
God bade us to increase and multiply;
That worthy text can I well understand.

30
And well I know he said, too, my husband
Should father leave, and mother, and cleave to me;
But no specific number mentioned He,
Whether of bigamy or octogamy;
Why should men speak of it reproachfully?

35
Lo, there's the wise old king Dan Solomon;
I understand he had more wives than one;
And now would God it were permitted me
To be refreshed one half as oft as he!
Which gift of God he had for all his wives!

40
No man has such that in this world now lives.
God knows, this noble king, it strikes my wit,
The first night he had many a merry fit
With each of them, so much he was alive!
Praise be to God that I have wedded five!

45
(Of whom I did pick out and choose the best
Both for their nether purse and for their chest
Different schools make divers perfect clerks,
Different methods learned in sundry works
Make the good workman perfect, certainly.

50
Of full five husbands tutoring am I.)
Welcome the sixth whenever come he shall.
Forsooth, I'll not keep chaste for good and all;
When my good husband from the world is gone,
Some Christian man shall marry me anon;

55
For then, the apostle says that I am free
To wed, in God's name, where it pleases me.
He says that to be wedded is no sin;
Better to marry than to burn within.
What care I though folk speak reproachfully

60
Of wicked Lamech and his bigamy?
I know well Abraham was holy man,
And Jacob, too, as far as know I can;
And each of them had spouses more than two;
And many another holy man also.

65
Or can you say that you have ever heard
That God has ever by His express word
Marriage forbidden? Pray you, now, tell me.
Or where commanded he virginity?
I read as well as you no doubt have read

70

The apostle when he speaks of maidenhead;
He said, commandment of the Lord he'd none.
Men may advise a woman to be one,
But such advice is not commandment, no;
He left the thing to our own judgment so.

75

For had Lord God commanded maidenhood,
He'd have condemned all marriage as not good;
And certainly, if there were no seed sown,
Virginity, where then should it be grown?
Paul dared not to forbid us, at the least,

80

A thing whereof his master'd no behest.
The dart is set up for virginity;
Catch it who can; who runs best let us see.
But this word is not meant for every wight,
But where God wills to give it, of His might.

85

I know well that the apostle was a virgin;
Nevertheless, and though he wrote and urged in,
He would that everyone were such as he,
All is not counsel to virginity;
And so to be a wife he gave me leave

90

Out of permission; there's no shame should grieve
In marrying me, if that my mate should die,
Without exception, too, of bigamy.
And though 'twere good no woman flesh to touch,
He meant, in his own bed or on his couch;

95

For peril 'tis fire and tow to assemble;
You know what this example may resemble.
This is the sum: he held virginity
Nearer perfection than marriage for frailty.
And frailty's all, I say, save he and she

100

Would lead their lives throughout in chastity.
I grant this well, I have no great envy
Though maidenhood's preferred to bigamy;
Let those who will be clean, body and ghost,
Of my condition I will make no boast.

105

For well you know, a lord in his household,
He has not every vessel all of gold;
Some are of wood and serve well all their days.
God calls folk unto him in sundry ways,
And each one has from God a proper gift,

110

Some this, some that, as pleases him to shift.
Virginity is great perfection known,
And continence also with devotion shown.
But Christ, who of perfection is the well,
Bade not each separate man he should go sell

115

All that he had and give it to the poor
And follow him in such wise going before.
He spoke to those that would live perfectly;
And, masters, by your leave, such am not I.
I will devote the flower of all my age

120

To all the acts and harvests of marriage.
Tell me also, to what purpose or end
The genitals were made, that I defend,
And for what benefit was man first wrought?
Trust you right well, they were not made for naught.

125

Explain who will and argue up and down
That they were made for passing out, as known,
Of urine, and our two belongings small
Were just to tell a female from a male,
And for no other cause - ah, say you no?

130

Experience knows well it is not so;
And, so the clerics be not with me wroth,
I say now that they have been made for both,
That is to say, for duty and for ease
In getting, when we do not God displease.

135

Why should men otherwise in their books set
That man shall pay unto his wife his debt?
Now wherewith should he ever make payment,
Except he used his blessed instrument?
Then on a creature were devised these things

140

For urination and engenderings.
But I say not that everyone is bound,
Who's fitted out and furnished as I've found,
To go and use it to beget an heir;
Then men would have for chastity no care.

145

Christ was a maid, and yet shaped like a man,
And many a saint, since this old world began,
Yet has lived ever in perfect chastity.
I bear no malice to virginity;
Let such be bread of purest white wheat-seed,

150

And let us wives be called but barley bread;
And yet with barley bread, if Mark you scan
Jesus Our Lord refreshed full many a man.
In such condition as God places us
I'll persevere, I'm not fastidious.

155

In wifehood I will use my instrument
As freely as my Maker has it sent.
If I be niggardly, God give me sorrow!
My husband he shall have it, eve and morrow,
When he's pleased to come forth and pay his debt.

160

I'll not delay, a husband I will get
Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall
And have his tribulations therewithal
Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.
I have the power during all my life

165

Over his own good body, and not he.
For thus the apostle told it unto me;
And bade our husbands that they love us well.
And all this pleases me whereof I tell."
Up rose the pardoner, and that anon.

170

"Now dame," said he, "by God and by Saint John,
You are a noble preacher in this case!
I was about to wed a wife, alas!
Why should I buy this on my flesh so dear?
No, I would rather wed no wife this year."

175

"But wait," said she, "my tale is not begun;
Nay, you shall drink from out another tun
Before I cease, and savour worse than ale.
And when I shall have told you all my tale
Of tribulation that is in marriage,

180

Whereof I've been an expert all my age,
That is to say, myself have been the whip,
Then may you choose whether you will go sip
Out of that very tun which I shall broach.
Beware of it before you too near approach;

185

For I shall give examples more than ten.
Whoso will not be warned by other men
By him shall other men corrected be,
The self-same words has written Ptolemy;
Read in his Almagest and find it there."

190

"Lady, I pray you, if your will it were,"
Spoke up this pardoner, "as you began,
Tell forth your tale, nor spare for any man,
And teach us younger men of your technique."
"Gladly," said she, "since it may please, not pique.

195

But yet I pray of all this company
That if I speak from my own phantasy,
They will not take amiss the things I say;
For my intention's only but to play.
"Now, sirs, now will I tell you forth my tale.

200

And as I may drink ever wine and ale,
I will tell truth of husbands that I've had,
For three of them were good and two were bad.
The three were good men and were rich and old.
Not easily could they the promise hold

205

Whereby they had been bound to cherish me.
You know well what I mean by that, pardie!
So help me God, I laugh now when I think
How pitifully by night I made them swink;
And by my faith I set by it no store.

210

They'd given me their gold, and treasure more;
I needed not do longer diligence
To win their love, or show them reverence.
They all loved me so well, by God above,
I never did set value on their love!

215

A woman wise will strive continually
To get herself loved, when she's not, you see.
But since I had them wholly in my hand,
And since to me they'd given all their land,
Why should I take heed, then, that I should please,

220

Save it were for my profit or my ease?
I set them so to work, that, by my fay,
Full many a night they sighed out 'Welaway!'
The bacon was not brought them home, I trow,
That some men have in Essex at Dunmowe.

225

I governed them so well, by my own law,
That each of them was happy as a daw,
And fain to bring me fine things from the fair.
And they were right glad when I spoke them fair;
For God knows that I nagged them mercilessly.

230

Now hearken how I bore me properly,
All you wise wives that well can understand.
Thus shall you speak and wrongfully demand;
For half so brazenfacedly can no man
Swear to his lying as a woman can.

235

I say not this to wives who may be wise,
Except when they themselves do misadvise.
A wise wife, if she knows what's for her good,
Will swear the crow is mad, and in this mood
Call up for witness to it her own maid;

240

But hear me now, for this is what I said.
"Sir Dotard, is it thus you stand today?
Why is my neighbour's wife so fine and gay?
She's honoured over all where'er she goes;
I sit at home, I have no decent clothes.

245

What do you do there at my neighbour's house?
Is she so fair? Are you so amorous?
Why whisper to our maid? Benedicite!
Sir Lecher old, let your seductions be!
And if I have a gossip or a friend,

250

Innocently, you blame me like a fiend
If I but walk, for company, to his house!
You come home here as drunken as a mouse,
And preach there on your bench, a curse on you!
You tell me it's a great misfortune, too,

255

To wed a girl who costs more than she's worth;
And if she's rich and of a higher birth,
You say it's torment to abide her folly
And put up with her pride and melancholy.
And if she be right fair, you utter knave,

260

You say that every lecher will her have;
She may no while in chastity abide
That is assailed by all and on each side.
You say, some men desire us for our gold,
Some for our shape and some for fairness told:

265

And some, that she can either sing or dance,
And some, for courtesy and dalliance;
Some for her hands and for her arms so small;
Thus all goes to the devil in your tale.
You say men cannot keep a castle wall

270

That's long assailed on all sides, and by all.
And if that she be foul, you say that she
Hankers for every man that she may see;
For like a spaniel will she leap on him
Until she finds a man to be victim;

275

And not a grey goose swims there in the lake
But finds a gander willing her to take.
You say, it is a hard thing to enfold
Her whom no man will in his own arms hold.
This say you, worthless, when you go to bed;

280

And that no wise man needs thus to be wed,
No, nor a man that hearkens unto heaven.
With furious thunder-claps and fiery levin
May your thin, withered, wrinkled neck be broke:
You say that dripping eaves, and also smoke,

285

And wives contentious, will make men to flee
Out of their houses; ah, benedicite!
What ails such an old fellow so to chide?
You say that all we wives our vices hide
Till we are married, then we show them well;

290

That is a scoundrel's proverb, let me tell!
You say that oxen, asses, horses, hounds
Are tried out variously, and on good grounds;
Basins and bowls, before men will them buy,
And spoons and stools and all such goods you try.

295

And so with pots and clothes and all array;
But of their wives men get no test, you say,
Till they are married, base old dotard you!
And then we show what evil we can do.
You say also that it displeases me

300

Unless you praise and flatter my beauty,
And save you gaze always upon my face
And call me "lovely lady" every place;
And save you make a feast upon that day
When I was born, and give me garments gay;

305

And save due honour to my nurse is paid
As well as to my faithful chambermaid,
And to my father's folk and his allies-
Thus you go on, old barrel full of lies!
And yet of our apprentice, young Jenkin,

310

For his crisp hair, showing like gold so fine,
Because he squires me walking up and down,
A false suspicion in your mind is sown;
I'd give him naught, though you were dead
tomorrow.

But tell me this, why do you hide, with sorrow,

315

The keys to your strong-box away from me?
It is my gold as well as yours, pardie.
Why would you make an idiot of your dame?
Now by Saint James, but you shall miss your aim,
You shall not be, although like mad you scold,

320

Master of both my body and my gold;
One you'll forgo in spite of both your eyes;
Why need you seek me out or set on spies?
I think you'd like to lock me in your chest!
You should say: "Dear wife, go where you like best,

325

Amuse yourself, I will believe no tales;
You're my wife Alis true, and truth prevails."
We love no man that guards us or gives charge
Of where we go, for we will be at large.
Of all men the most blessed may he be,

330

That wise astrologer, Dan Ptolemy,
Who says this proverb in his Almagest:
'Of all men he's in wisdom the highest
That nothing cares who has the world in hand.'
And by this proverb shall you understand:

335

Since you've enough, why do you reck or care
How merrily all other folks may fare?
For certainly, old dotard, by your leave,
You shall have cunt all right enough at eve.
He is too much a niggard who's so tight

340

That from his lantern he'll give none a light.
For he'll have never the less light, by gad;
Since you've enough, you need not be so sad.
You say, also, that if we make us gay
With clothing, all in costliest array,

345

That it's a danger to our chastity;
And you must back the saying up, pardie!
Repeating these words in the apostle's name:

"In habits meet for chastity, not shame,
Your women shall be garmented," said he,

350

"And not with broidered hair, or jewellery,
Or pearls, or gold, or costly gowns and chic;"
After your text and after your rubric
I will not follow more than would a gnat
You said this, too, that I was like a cat;

355

For if one care to singe a cat's furred skin,
Then would the cat remain the house within;
And if the cat's coat be all sleek and gay,
She will not keep in house a half a day,
But out she'll go, before dawn of any day,

360

To show her skin and caterwaul and play.
This is to say, if I'm a little gay,
To show my rags I'll gad about all day.
Sir Ancient Fool, what ails you with your spies?
Though you pray Argus, with his hundred eyes,

365

To be my bodyguard and do his best,
Faith, he sha'n't hold me, save I am modest;
I could delude him easily- trust me!
You said, also, that there are three things- three-
The which things are a trouble on this earth,

370

And that no man may ever endure the fourth:
O dear Sir Rogue, may Christ cut short your life!
Yet do you preach and say a hateful wife
Is to be reckoned one of these mischances.
Are there no other kinds of resemblances

375

That you may liken thus your parables to,
But must a hapless wife be made to do?
You liken woman's love to very Hell,
To desert land where waters do not well.
You liken it, also, unto wildfire;

380

The more it burns, the more it has desire
To consume everything that burned may be.

You say that just as worms destroy a tree,
Just so a wife destroys her own husband;
Men know this who are bound in marriage band."

385

Masters, like this, as you must understand,
Did I my old men charge and censure, and
Claim that they said these things in drunkenness;
And all was false, but yet I took witness
Of Jenkin and of my dear niece also.

390

O Lord, the pain I gave them and the woe,
All guiltless, too, by God's grief exquisite!
For like a stallion could I neigh and bite.
I could complain, though mine was all the guilt,
Or else, full many a time, I'd lost the tilt.

395

Whoso comes first to mill first gets meal ground;
I whimpered first and so did them confound.
They were right glad to hasten to excuse
Things they had never done, save in my ruse.
With wenches would I charge him, by this hand,

400

When, for some illness, he could hardly stand.
Yet tickled this the heart of him, for he
Deemed it was love produced such jealousy.
I swore that all my walking out at night
Was but to spy on girls he kept outright;

405

And under cover of that I had much mirth.
For all such wit is given us at birth;
Deceit, weeping, and spinning, does God give
To women, naturally, the while they live.
And thus of one thing I speak boastfully,

410

I got the best of each one, finally,
By trick, or force, or by some kind of thing,
As by continual growls or murmuring;
Especially in bed had they mischance,
There would I chide and give them no pleasance;

415

I would no longer in the bed abide

If I but felt his arm across my side,
Till he had paid his ransom unto me;
Then would I let him do his nicety.
And therefore to all men this tale I tell,

420

Let gain who may, for everything's to sell.
With empty hand men may no falcons lure;
For profit would I all his lust endure,
And make for him a well-feigned appetite;
Yet I in bacon never had delight;

425

And that is why I used so much to chide.
For if the pope were seated there beside
I'd not have spared them, no, at their own board.
For by my truth, I paid them, word for word.
So help me the True God Omnipotent,

430

Though I right now should make my testament,
I owe them not a word that was not quit.
I brought it so about, and by my wit,
That they must give it up, as for the best,
Or otherwise we'd never have had rest.

435

For though he glared and scowled like lion mad,
Yet failed he of the end he wished he had.
Then would I say: "Good dearie, see you keep
In mind how meek is Wilkin, our old sheep;
Come near, my spouse, come let me kiss your
cheek!

440

You should be always patient, aye, and meek,
And have a sweetly scrupulous tenderness,
Since you so preach of old Job's patience, yes.
Suffer always, since you so well can preach;
And, save you do, be sure that we will teach

445

That it is well to leave a wife in peace.
One of us two must bow, to be at ease;
And since a man's more reasonable, they say,
Than woman is, you must have patience aye.
What ails you that you grumble thus and groan?

450

Is it because you'd have my cunt alone?
Why take it all, lo, have it every bit;
Peter! Beshrew you but you're fond of it!
For if I would go peddle my belle chose,
I could walk out as fresh as is a rose;

455

But I will keep it for your own sweet tooth.
You are to blame, by God I tell the truth."
Such were the words I had at my command.
Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.
"My fourth husband, he was a reveller,

460

That is to say, he kept a paramour;
And young and full of passion then was I,
Stubborn and strong and jolly as a pie.
Well could I dance to tune of harp, nor fail
To sing as well as any nightingale

465

When I had drunk a good draught of sweet wine.
Metellius, the foul churl and the swine,
Did with a staff deprive his wife of life
Because she drank wine; had I been his wife
He never should have frightened me from drink;

470

For after wine, of Venus must I think:
For just as surely as cold produces hail,
A liquorish mouth must have a lickerish tail.
In drunken women has no means of defence,
This know all lechers by experience.

475

But Lord Christ! When I do remember me
Upon my youth and on my jollity,
It tickles me about my heart's deep root.
To this day does my heart sing in salute
That I have had my world in my own time.

480

But age, alas! that poisons every prime,
Has taken away my beauty and my pith;
Let go, farewell, the devil go therewith!
The flour is gone, there is no more to tell,
The bran, as best I may, must I now sell;

485

But yet to be right merry I'll try, and
Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.
I say that in my heart I'd great despite
When he of any other had delight.
But he was quit by God and by Saint Joce!

490

I made, of the same wood, a staff most gross;
Not with my body and in manner foul,
But certainly I showed so gay a soul
That in his own thick grease I made him fry
For anger and for utter jealousy.

495

By God, on earth I was his purgatory,
For which I hope his soul lives now in glory.
For God knows, many a time he sat and sung
When the shoe bitterly his foot had wrung.
There was no one, save God and he, that knew

500

How, in so many ways, I'd twist the screw.
He died when I came from Jerusalem,
And lies entombed beneath the great rood-beam,
Although his tomb is not so glorious
As was the sepulchre of Darius,

505

The which Apelles wrought full cleverly;
'Twas waste to bury him expensively.
Let him fare well. God give his soul good rest,
He now is in the grave and in his chest.
And now of my fifth husband will I tell.

510

God grant his soul may never get to Hell!
And yet he was to me most brutal, too;
My ribs yet feel as they were black and blue,
And ever shall, until my dying day.
But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,

515

And therewithal he could so well impose,
What time he wanted use of my belle chose,
That though he'd beaten me on every bone,
He could re-win my love, and that full soon.
I guess I loved him best of all, for he

520

Gave of his love most sparingly to me.
We women have, if I am not to lie,
In this love matter, a quaint fantasy;
Look out a thing we may not lightly have,
And after that we'll cry all day and crave.

525

Forbid a thing, and that thing covet we;
Press hard upon us, then we turn and flee.
Sparingly offer we our goods, when fair;
Great crowds at market for dearer ware,
And what's too common brings but little price;

530

All this knows every woman who is wise.
My fifth husband, may God his spirit bless!
Whom I took all for love, and not riches,
Had been sometime a student at Oxford,
And had left school and had come home to board

535

With my best gossip, dwelling in our town,
God save her soul! Her name was Alison.
She knew my heart and all my privy
Better than did our parish priest, s'help me!
To her confided I my secrets all.

540

For had my husband pissed against a wall,
Or done a thing that might have cost his life,
To her and to another worthy wife,
And to my niece whom I loved always well,
I would have told it - every bit I'd tell,

545

And did so, many and many a time, knows God,
Which made his face full often red and hot
For utter shame; he blamed himself that he
Had told me of so deep a privy.
So it happened that on a time, in Lent

550

For oftentimes I to my gossip went,
Since I loved always to be glad and gay
And to walk out, in March, April, and May,
From house to house, to hear the latest malice,
Jenkin the clerk, and my gossip Dame Alis,

555

And I myself into the meadows went.
My husband was in London all that Lent;
I had the greater leisure, then, to play,
And to observe, and to be seen, I say,
By pleasant folk; what knew I where my face

560

Was destined to be loved, or in what place?
Therefore I made my visits round about
To vigils and processions of devout,
To preaching too, and shrines of pilgrimage,
To miracle plays, and always to each marriage,

565

And wore my scarlet skirt before all wights.
These worms and all these moths and all these
mites,
I say it at my peril, never ate;
And know you why? I wore it early and late.

570

I say that in the meadows walked we three
Till, truly, we had come to such dalliance,
This clerk and I, that, of my vigilance,
I spoke to him and told him how that he,
Were I a widow, might well marry me.

575

For certainly I say it not to brag,
But I was never quite without a bag
Full of the needs of marriage that I seek.
I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek
That has but one hole into which to run,

580

And if it fail of that, then all is done.
I made him think he had enchanted me;
My mother taught me all that subtlety.
And then I said I'd dreamed of him all night,
He would have slain me as I lay upright,

585

And all my bed was full of very blood;
But yet I hoped that he would do me good,
For blood betokens gold, as I was taught.
And all was false, I dreamed of him just- naught,
Save as I acted on my mother's lore,

590

As well in this thing as in many more.
But now, let's see, what was I going to say?
Aha, by God, I know! It goes this way.
When my fourth husband lay upon his bier,
I wept enough and made but sorry cheer,

595

As wives must always, for it's custom's grace,
And with my kerchief covered up my face;
But since I was provided with a mate,
I really wept but little, I may state.
To church my man was borne upon the morrow

600

By neighbours, who for him made signs of sorrow;
And Jenkin, our good clerk, was one of them.
So help me God, when rang the requiem
After the bier, I thought he had a pair
Of legs and feet so clean-cut and so fair

605

That all my heart I gave to him to hold.
He was, I think, but twenty winters old,
And I was forty, if I tell the truth;
But then I always had a young colt's tooth.
Gap-toothed I was, and that became me well;

610

I had the print of holy Venus' seal.
So help me God, I was a healthy one,
And fair and rich and young and full of fun;
And truly, as my husbands all told me,
I had the silkiest quoniam that could be.

615

For truly, I am all Venusian
In feeling, and my brain is Martian.
Venus gave me my lust, my lickerishness,
And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.
Taurus was my ascendant, with Mars therein.

620

Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
I followed always my own inclination
By virtue of my natal constellation;
Which wrought me so I never could withdraw
My Venus-chamber from a good fellow.

625

Yet have I Mars's mark upon my face,
And also in another private place.
For God so truly my salvation be
As I have never loved for policy,
But ever followed my own appetite,

630

Though he were short or tall, or black or white;
I took no heed, so that he cared for me,
How poor he was, nor even of what degree.
What should I say now, save, at the month's end,
This jolly, gentle, Jenkin clerk, my friend,

635

Had wedded me full ceremoniously,
And to him gave I all the land in fee
That ever had been given me before;
But, later I repented me full sore.
He never suffered me to have my way.

640

By God, he hit me on the ear, one day,
Because I tore out of his book a leaf,
So that from this my ear is grown quite deaf.
Stubborn I was as is a lioness,
And with my tongue a very jay, I guess,

645

And walk I would, as I had done before,
From house to house, though I should not, he
swore.
For which he oftentimes would sit and preach
And read old Roman tales to me and teach
How one Sulpicius Gallus left his wife

650

And her forsook for term of all his life
Because he saw her with bared head, I say,
Looking out from his door, upon a day.
Another Roman told he of by name
Who, since his wife was at a summer-game

655

Without his knowing, he forsook her eke.
And then would he within his Bible seek
That proverb of the old Ecclesiast
Where he commands so freely and so fast

That man forbid his wife to gad about;

660

Then would he thus repeat, with never doubt:
Whoso would build his whole house out of shallows,
And spur his blind horse to run over fallows,
And let his wife alone go seeking hallows,
Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.

665

But all for naught, I didn't care a haw
For all his proverbs, nor for his old saw,
Nor yet would I by him corrected be.
I hate one that my vices tells to me,
And so do more of us- God knows!- than I.

670

This made him mad with me, and furiously,
That I'd not yield to him in any case.
Now will I tell you truth, by Saint Thomas,
Of why I tore from out his book a leaf,
For which he struck me so it made me deaf.

675

He had a book that gladly, night and day,
For his amusement he would read alway.
He called it 'Theophrastus' and 'Valerius',
At which book would he laugh, uproarious.
And, too, there sometime was a clerk at Rome,

680

A cardinal, that men called Saint Jerome,
Who made a book against Jovinian;
In which book, too, there was Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise
Who was abbess near Paris' diocese;

685

And too, the Proverbs of King Solomon,
And Ovid's Art, and books full many a one.
And all of these were bound in one volume.
And every night and day 'twas his custom,
When he had leisure and took some vacation

690

From all his other worldly occupation,
To read, within this book, of wicked wives.
He knew of them more legends and more lives

Than are of good wives written in the Bible.
For trust me, it's impossible, no libel,

695

That any cleric shall speak well of wives,
Unless it be of saints and holy lives,
But naught for other women will they do.
Who painted first the lion, tell me who?
By God, if women had but written stories,

700

As have these clerks within their oratories,
They would have written of men more wickedness
Than all the race of Adam could redress.
The children of Mercury and of Venus
Are in their lives antagonistic thus;

705

For Mercury loves wisdom and science,
And Venus loves but pleasure and expense.
Because they different dispositions own,
Each falls when other's in ascendant shown.
And God knows Mercury is desolate

710

In Pisces, wherein Venus rules in state;
And Venus falls when Mercury is raised;
Therefore no woman by a clerk is praised.
A clerk, when he is old and can naught do
Of Venus' labours worth his worn-out shoe,

715

Then sits he down and writes, in his dotage,
That women cannot keep vow of marriage!
But now to tell you, as I started to,
Why I was beaten for a book, pardieu.
Upon a night Jenkin, who was our sire,

720

Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,
Of Mother Eve who, by her wickedness,
First brought mankind to all his wretchedness,
For which Lord Jesus Christ Himself was slain,
Who, with His heart's blood, saved us thus again.

725

Lo here, expressly of woman, may you find
That woman was the ruin of mankind.

Then read he out how Samson lost his hairs,
Sleeping, his leman cut them with her shears;
And through this treason lost he either eye.

730

Then read he out, if I am not to lie,
Of Hercules, and Deianira's desire
That caused him to go set himself on fire.
Nothing escaped him of the pain and woe
That Socrates had with his spouses two;

735

How Xantippe threw piss upon his head;
This hapless man sat still, as he were dead;
He wiped his head, no more durst he complain
Than 'Ere the thunder ceases comes the rain.'
Then of Pasiphae, the queen of Crete,

740

For cursedness he thought the story sweet;
Fie! Say no more - it is an awful thing -
Of her so horrible lust and love-liking.
Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery,
Who caused her husband's death by treachery,

745

He read all this with greatest zest, I vow.
He told me, too, just when it was and how
Amphiaraus at Thebes lost his life;
My husband had a legend of his wife
Eriphyle who, for a brooch of gold,

750

In secrecy to hostile Greeks had told
Whereat her husband had his hiding place,
For which he found at Thebes but sorry grace.
Of Livia and Lucia told he me,
For both of them their husbands killed, you see,

755

The one for love, the other killed for hate;
Livia her husband, on an evening late,
Made drink some poison, for she was his foe.
Lucia, lecherous, loved her husband so
That, to the end he'd always of her think,

760

She gave him such a, philtre, for love-drink,

That he was dead or ever it was morrow;
And husbands thus, by same means, came to
sorrow.

Then did he tell how one Latumius
Complained unto his comrade Arrius

765

That in his garden grew a baleful tree
Whereon, he said, his wives, and they were three,
Had hanged themselves for wretchedness and woe.
"O brother," Arrius said, "and did they so?
Give me a graft of that same blessed tree

770

And in my garden planted it shall be!"
Of wives of later date he also read,
How some had slain their husbands in their bed
And let their lovers shag them all the night
While corpses lay upon the floor upright.

775

And some had driven nails into the brain
While husbands slept and in such wise were slain.
And some had given them poison in their drink.
He told more evil than the mind can think.
And therewithal he knew of more proverbs

780

Than in this world there grows of grass or herbs.
"Better," he said, "your habitation be
With lion wild or dragon foul," said he,
"Than with a woman who will nag and chide."
"Better," he said, "on the housetop abide

785

Than with a brawling wife down in the house;
Such are so wicked and contrarious
They hate the thing their husband loves, for aye."
He said, "a woman throws her shame away
When she throws off her smock," and further, too:

790

"A woman fair, save she be chaste also,
Is like a ring of gold in a sow's nose."
Who would imagine or who would suppose
What grief and pain were in this heart of mine?
And when I saw he'd never cease, in fine,
God help me now, I was to him as kind

795 His reading in this cursed book at night,
Three leaves of it I snatched and tore outright
Out of his book, as he read on; and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheek
That in our fire he reeled and fell right down.

800

Then he got up as does a wild lion,
And with his fist he struck me on the head,
And on the floor I lay as I were dead.
And when he saw how limp and still I lay,
He was afraid and would have run away,

805

Until at last, out of my swoon I made:
'Oh, have you slain me, you false thief?' I said,
'And for my land have you thus murdered me?
Kiss me before I die, and let me be.'
He came to me and near me he knelt down,

810

And said: 'O my dear sister Alison,
So help me God, I'll never strike you more;
What I have done, you are to blame therefor.
But all the same forgiveness now I seek!'
And thereupon I hit him on the cheek,

815

And said: 'Thief, so much vengeance do I wreak!
Now will I die; I can no longer speak!'
But at the last, and with much care and woe,
We made it up between ourselves. And so
He put the bridle reins within my hand

820

To have the governing of house and land;
And of his tongue and of his hand, also;
And made him burn his book, right then, oho!
And when I had thus gathered unto me
Masterfully, the entire sovereignty,

825

And he had said: 'My own true wedded wife,
Do as you please the term of all your life,
Guard your own honour and keep fair my state!'-
After that day we never had debate.
As any wife from Denmark unto Ind,

830

And also true, and so was he to me.

I pray to God, Who sits in majesty,

To bless his soul, out of His mercy dear!

Now will I tell my tale, if you will hear."

The Wife of Bath's Tale



Now in the olden days of King Arthur,
Of whom the Britons speak with great honour,

- 865 All this wide land was land of faery.
The elf-queen, with her jolly company,
Danced oftentimes on many a green mead;
This was the old opinion, as I read.
I speak of many hundred years ago;
- 870 But now no man can see the elves, you know.
For now the so-great charity and prayers
Of limiters and other holy friars
That do infest each land and every stream
As thick as motes are in a bright sunbeam,
- 875 Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies' bowers,
Cities and towns and castles and high towers,
Manors and barns and stables, aye and dairies -
This causes it that there are now no fairies.
For where was wont to walk full many an elf,
- 880 Right there walks now the limiter himself
In noons and afternoons and in mornings,
Saying his matins and such holy things,
As he goes round his district in his gown.
Women may now go safely up and down,
- 885 In every copse or under every tree;
There is no other incubus, than he,
And would do them nothing but dishonour.
And so it happened that this King Arthur
Had at his court a lusty bachelor
- 890 Who, on a day, came riding from river;
And happened that, alone as she was born,
He saw a maiden walking through the corn,
From whom, in spite of all her screams of pity,
Straightway by force he took her virginity;
- 895 For which violation was there such clamour,
And such appealing unto King Arthur,
That soon condemned was this knight to be dead
By course of law, and should have lost his head,
Peradventure, such being the statute then;
- 900 But that the other ladies and the queen
So long prayed of the king to show him grace,
He granted life, at last, in the law's place,

And gave him to the queen, as she should will,
Whether she'd save him, or his blood should spill.

905 The queen she thanked the king with all her might,
And after this, thus spoke she to the knight,
When she'd an opportunity, one day:
"You stand yet," said she, "in such poor a way
That for your life you've no security.

910 I'll grant you life if you can tell to me
What thing it is that women most desire.
Be wise, and keep your neck from iron dire!
And if you cannot tell it me anon,
Then will I give you license to be gone

915 A twelvemonth and a day, to search and learn
Sufficient answer in this grave concern.
And your knight's word I'll have, before forth you pace,
To yield your body to me in this place."
Grieved was this knight, and sorrowfully he sighed;

920 But there! He could not do as pleased his pride.
And at the last he chose that he would wend
And come again upon the twelvemonth's end,
With such an answer as God might purvey;
And so he took his leave and went his way.

925 He sought out every house and every place
Wherein he hoped to find that he had grace
To learn what women love the most of all;
But nowhere ever did it him befall
To find, upon the question stated here,

930 Two, persons who agreed with statement clear.
Some said that women all loved best riches,
Some said, fair fame, and some said, prettiness;
Some, rich array, some said 'twas lust abed
And often to be widowed and re-wed.

935 Some said that our poor hearts are aye most eased
When we have been most flattered and thus pleased
And he went near the truth, I will not lie;
A man may win us best with flattery;
And with attentions and with busyness

940 We're often limed, the greater and the less.
And some say, too, that we do love the best
To be quite free to do our own behest,
And that no man reprove us for our vice,

But saying we are wise, take our advice.

- 945 For truly there is no one of us all,
If anyone shall rub us on a gall,
That will not kick because he tells the truth.
Try, and he'll find, who does so, I say sooth.
No matter how much vice we have within,
- 950 We would be held for wise and clean of sin.
And some folk say that great delight have we
To be held constant, also trustworthy,
And on one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
And not betray a thing that men may tell.
- 955 But that tale is not worth a rake's handle;
By God, we women can no thing conceal,
As witness Midas. Would you hear the tale?
Ovid, among some other matters small,
Said Midas had beneath his long curled hair,
- 960 Two ass's ears that grew in secret there,
The which defect he hid, as best he might,
Full cunningly from every person's sight,
And, save his wife, no one knew of it, no.
He loved her most, and trusted her also;
- 965 And he prayed of her that to no creature
She'd tell of his disfigurement impure.
She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win
She would do no such villainy or sin
And cause her husband have so foul a name;
- 970 Nor would she tell it for her own deep shame.
Nevertheless, she thought she would have died
Because so long the secret must she hide;
It seemed to swell so big about her heart
That some word from her mouth must surely start;
- 975 And since she dared to tell it to no man,
Down to a marsh, that lay hard by, she ran;
Till she came there her heart was all afire,
And as a bittern booms in the quagmire,
She laid her mouth low to the water down:
- 980 "Betray me not, you sounding water blown,"
Said she, "I tell it to none else but you:
Long ears like asses' has my husband two!
Now is my heart at ease, since that is out;
I could no longer keep it, there's no doubt."

- 985 Here may you see, though for a while we bide,
Yet out it must; no secret can we hide.
The rest of all this tale, if you would hear,
Read Ovid: in his book does it appear.
This knight my tale is chiefly told about
- 990 When what he went for he could not find out,
That is, the thing that women love the best,
Most saddened was the spirit in his breast;
But home he goes, he could no more delay.
The day was come when home he turned his way;
- 995 And on his way it chanced that he should ride
In all his care, beneath a forest's side,
And there he saw, a-dancing him before,
Full four and twenty ladies, maybe more;
Toward which dance eagerly did he turn
- 1000 In hope that there some wisdom he should learn.
But truly, before he came upon them there,
The dancers vanished all, he knew not where.
No creature saw he that gave sign of life,
Except, on the greensward sitting, an old wife;
- 1005 A fouler person could no man devise.
Before the knight this old wife did arise,
And said: "Sir Knight, hence lies no travelled way.
Tell me what thing you seek, and by your fay.
Perchance you'll find it may the better be;
- 1010 These ancient folk know many things," said she.
"Dear mother," said this knight assuredly,
"I am as good as dead, unless I can tell, truly,
What thing it is that women most desire;
Could you inform me, I'd pay well your hire."
- 1015 "Give me your promise here, hand in hand," said she,
"That you will do, whatever it may be,
The thing I ask if it lie in your might;
And I'll give you your answer before the night."
"Have here my word," said he. "That thing I grant."
- 1020 "Then," said the crone, "of this I make my vaunt,
Your life is safe; and I will stand thereby,
Upon my life, the queen will say as I.
Let's see which is the proudest of them all
That wears upon her hair kerchief or caul,

- 1025 Shall dare say no to that which I shall teach;
Let us go now and without longer speech."
Then whispered she a sentence in his ear,
And bade him to be glad and have no fear.
When they were come unto the court, this knight
- 1030 Said he had kept his promise as was right,
And ready was his answer, as he said.
Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,
And many a widow, since they are so wise,
The queen herself sitting as high justice,
- 1035 Assembled were, his answer there to hear;
And then the knight was bidden to appear.
Command was given for silence in the hall,
And that the knight should tell before them all
What thing all worldly women love the best.
- 1040 This knight did not stand dumb, as does a beast,
But to this question promptly answered
With manly voice, so that the whole court heard:
"My liege lady, generally," said he,
"Women desire to have the sovereignty
- 1045 As well upon their husband as their love,
And to have mastery their man above;
This thing you most desire, though me you kill
Do as you please, I am here at your will."
In all the court there was no wife or maid
- 1050 Or widow that denied the thing he said,
But all held, he was worthy to have life.
And with that word up started the old wife
Whom he had seen a-sitting on the green.
"Mercy," cried she, "my sovereign lady queen!
- 1055 Before the court's dismissed, give me my right.
'Twas I who taught the answer to this knight;
For which he did gave his word to me, out there,
That the first thing I should of him require
He would do that, if it lay in his might.
- 1060 Before the court, now, pray I you, sir knight,"
Said she, "that you will take me for your wife;
For well you know that I have saved your life.
If this be false, say nay, upon your fay!"
This knight replied: "Alas and welaway!
- 1065 That I so promised I will not protest.

But for God's love pray make a new request.
Take all my wealth and let my body go."
"Nay then," said she, "beshrew us if I do!
For though I may be foul and old and poor,

1070 I will not, for all metal and all ore
That from the earth is dug or lies above,
Be aught except your wife and your true love."
"My love?" cried he, "nay, rather my damnation!
Alas! that any of my race and station

1075 Should ever so dishonoured foully be!"
But all for naught; the end was this, that he
Was so constrained he needs must go and wed,
And take his ancient wife and go to bed.
Now, peradventure, would some men say here,

1080 That, of my negligence, I take no care
To tell you of the joy and all the array
That at the wedding feast were seen that day.
Make a brief answer to this thing I shall;
I say, there was no joy or feast at all;

1085 There was but heaviness and grievous sorrow;
For privately he wedded on the morrow,
And all day, then, he hid him like an owl;
So sad he was, his old wife looked so foul.
Great was the woe the knight had in his thought

1090 When he, with her, to marriage bed was brought;
He rolled about and turned him to and fro.
His old wife lay there, always smiling so,
And said: "O my dear husband, ben'cite!
Fares every knight with wife as you with me?"

1095 Is this the custom in King Arthur's house?
Are knights of his all so fastidious?
I am your own true love and, more, your wife;
And I am she who saved your very life;
And truly, since I've never done you wrong,

1100 Why do you treat me so, this first night long?
You act as does a man who's lost his wit;
What is my fault? For God's love tell me it,
And it shall be amended, if I may."
"Amended!" cried this knight, "Alas, nay, nay!

1105 It will not be amended ever, no!
You are so loathsome, and so old also,

And therewith of so low a race were born,
It's little wonder that I toss and turn.
Would God my heart would break within my breast!"

1110 "Is this," asked she, "the cause of your unrest?"
"Yes, truly," said he, "and no wonder 'tis."
"Now, sir," said she, "I could amend all this,
If I but would, and that within days three,
If you would bear yourself well towards me.

1115 "But since you speak of such gentility
As is descended from old wealth, till ye
Claim that for that you should be gentlemen,
I hold such arrogance not worth a hen.
Find him who is most virtuous alway,

1120 Alone or publicly, and most tries aye
To do whatever noble deeds he can,
And take him for the greatest gentleman.
Christ wills we claim from him gentility,
Not from ancestors of landocracy.

1125 For though they give us all their heritage,
For which we claim to be of high lineage,
Yet can they not bequeath, in anything,
To any of us, their virtuous living,
That made men say they had gentility,

1130 And bade us follow them in like degree.
Well does that poet wise of great Florence,
Called Dante, speak his mind in this sentence;
Somewhat like this may it translated be:
'Rarely unto the branches of the tree

1135 Doth human worth mount up: and so ordains
He who bestows it; to him it pertains.'
For of our fathers may we nothing claim
But temporal things, that man may hurt and maim
And everyone knows this as well as I,

1140 If nobleness were implanted naturally
Within a certain lineage, down the line,
In private and in public, I opine,
The ways of gentleness they'd alway show
And never fall to vice and conduct low.

1145 Take fire and carry it in the darkest house
Between here and the Mount of Caucasus,
And let men shut the doors and from them turn;

- Yet will the fire as fairly blaze and burn
As twenty thousand men did it behold;
- 1150 Its nature and its office it will hold,
On peril of my life, until it die.
"From this you see that true gentility
Is not allied to wealth a man may own,
Since folk do not their deeds, as may be shown,
- 1155 As does the fire, according to its kind.
For God knows that men may full often find
A lord's son doing shame and villainy;
And he that prizes his gentility
In being born of some old noble house,
- 1160 With ancestors both noble and virtuous,
But will himself do naught of noble deeds
Nor follow him to whose name he succeeds,
He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
For acting churlish makes a man a churl.
- 1165 Gentility is not just the renown
Of ancestors who have some greatness shown,
In which you have no portion of your own.
Your own gentility comes from God alone;
Thence comes our true nobility by grace,
- 1170 It was not willed us with our rank and place
Think how noble, as says Valerius,
Was that same Tullius Hostilius,
Who out of poverty rose to high estate.
Seneca and Boethius inculcate,
- 1175 Expressly (and no doubt it thus proceeds),
That he is noble who does noble deeds;
And therefore, husband dear, I thus conclude:
Although my ancestors mayhap were rude,
Yet may the High Lord God, and so hope I,
- 1180 Grant me the grace to live right virtuously.
Then I'll be gentle when I do begin
To live in virtue and to do no sin.
And when you me reproach for poverty,
The High God, in Whom we believe, say I,
- 1185 In voluntary poverty lived His life.
And surely every man, or maid, or wife
May understand that Jesus, Heaven's King,
Would not have chosen vileness of living.

- Glad poverty's an honest thing, that's plain,
- 1190 Which Seneca and other clerks maintain.
Whoso will be content with poverty,
I hold him rich, though not a shirt has he.
And he that covets much is a poor wight,
For he would gain what's all beyond his might,
- 1195 But he that has not, nor desires to have,
Is rich, although you hold him but a knave.
"True poverty, it sings right naturally;
Juvenal gaily says of poverty:
'The poor man, when he walks along the way,
- 1200 Before the robbers he may sing and play.'
Poverty's odious good, and, as I guess,
It is a stimulant to busyness;
A great improver, too, of sapience
In him that takes it all with due patience.
- 1205 Poverty's this, though it seem misery -
Its quality may none dispute, say I.
Poverty often, when a man is low,
Makes him his God and even himself to know.
And poverty's an eye-glass, seems to me,
- 1210 Through which a man his loyal friends may see.
Since you've received no injury from me,
Then why reproach me for my poverty.
Now, sir, with age you have upbraided me;
And truly, sir, though no authority
- 1215 Were in a book, you gentles of honour
Say that men should the aged show favour,
And call him father, of your gentleness;
And authors could I find for this, I guess.
Now since you say that I am foul and old,
- 1220 Then fear you not to be made a cuckold;
For dirt and age, as prosperous I may be,
Are mighty wardens over chastity.
Nevertheless, since I know your delight,
I'll satisfy your worldly appetite.
- 1225 "Two choices," said she, "which one will you try,
To have me foul and old until I die,
And be to you a true and humble wife,
And never anger you in all my life;
Or else to have me young and very fair

- 1230 And take your chance with those who will repair
Unto your house, and all because of me,
Or in some other place, as well may be.
Now choose which you like better and reply."
This knight considered, and did sorely sigh,
- 1235 But at the last replied as you shall hear:
"My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
I put myself in your wise governing;
Do you choose which may be the more pleasing,
And bring most honour to you, and me also.
- 1240 I care not which it be of these things two;
For if you like it, that suffices me."
"Then have I got of you the mastery,
Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?"
"Yes, truly, wife," said he, "I hold that best."
- 1245 "Kiss me," said she, "we'll be no longer wroth,
For by my truth, to you I will be both;
That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.
I pray God I go mad, and so declare,
If I be not to you as good and true
- 1250 As ever wife was since the world was new.
And, save I be, at dawn, as fairly seen
As any lady, empress, or great queen
That is between the east and the far west,
Do with my life and death as you like best.
- 1255 Throw back the curtain and see how it is."
And when the knight saw verily all this,
That she so very fair was, and young too,
For joy he clasped her in his strong arms two,
His heart bathed in a bath of utter bliss;
- 1260 A thousand times, all in a row, he'd kiss.
And she obeyed his wish in everything
That might give pleasure to his love-liking.
And thus they lived unto their lives' fair end,
In perfect joy; and Jesus to us send
- 1265 Meek husbands, and young ones, and fresh in bed,
And good luck to outlive them that we wed.
And I pray Jesus to cut short the lives
Of those who'll not be governed by their wives;
And old and querulous niggards with their pence,
- 1270 And send them soon a mortal pestilence!

Miller description

The Miller seemed a tough sort for our journey,
He was heavy built, strong sinewed and brawny,
As was well proved by his always throwing down
All rivals at wrestling, to bear off the crown.
He was hunch-shouldered, broad, solid all round;
He could heave any door onto the ground
Or smash clean through by ramming with his head.

His beard like any sow or fox was red
And was so broad that it looked like a spade.
At the top of his nose there stood displayed
A wart, on which there grew a tuft of hairs,
As red as those bristles a sow's ear bears.
His nostrils were enormous, black and wide.
He wore a sword and shield by his side.
His mouth was huge, just like a great boiler.

He was noisy and full of coarse humour,
And tales filled with lasciviousness and crimes.
He stole enough to grind the corn three times,
Yet had a gold thumb, as a good miller should.
He was dressed in a white coat and blue hood.
He blew and played the bagpipes well I'd say,
And with his piping got us underway.

The Miller's Tale

Now when the knight had thus his story told,
In all the rout there was nor young nor old
But said it was a fine and noble story
Worthy to be kept in memory;

5
And specially the gentle folk, each one.
Our host, he laughed and swore, "So may I run,
But this goes well; unbuckled is the mail;
Let's see now who can tell another tale:
For certainly the game has well begun.

10
Now shall you tell, sir monk, if't can be done,
Something with which to pay for the knight's tale."
The miller, who of drinking was all pale,
So that unsteadily on his horse he sat,
He would not take off either hood or hat,

15
Nor wait for any man, in courtesy,
But all in Pilate's voice began to cry,
And "By the arms and blood and bones," he swore,
"I have a noble story in my store,
With which I will requite the good knight's tale."

20
Our host saw, then, that he was drunk with ale,
And said to him: "Wait, Robin, my dear brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another:
Submit and let us work on profitably."
"Now by God's soul," cried he, "that will not I!

25
For I will speak, or else I'll go my way."
Our host replied: "Tell on, then, till doomsday!
You are a fool, your wit is overcome."
"Now hear me," said the miller, "all and some!
But first I make a protestation round

30
That I'm quite drunk, I know it by my sound:
And therefore, if I slander or mis-say,
Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray;
For I will tell a legend and a life
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,

35
And how a scholar set the good wright's cap."
The reeve replied and said: "Oh, shut your tap,
Let be your ignorant drunken ribaldry!
It is a sin, and further, great folly
To asperse any man, or him defame,

40
And, too, to bring upon a man's wife shame.
There are enough of other things to say."
This drunken miller spoke on in his way,
And said: "Oh, but my dear brother Oswald,
The man who has no wife is no cuckold.

45
But I say not, thereby, that you are one:
Many good wives there are, as women run,
And ever a thousand good to one that's bad,
As well you know yourself, unless you're mad.
Why are you angry with my story's cue?

50
I have a wife, begad, as well as you,
Yet I'd not, for the oxen of my plow,
Take on my shoulders more than is enow,
By judging of myself that I am one;
I will believe full well that I am none.

55
A husband must not be inquisitive
Of God, nor of his wife, while she's alive.
So long as he may find God's plenty there,
For all the rest he need not greatly care."
What should I say, except this miller rare

60
He would forgo his talk for no man there,
But told his churlish tale in his own way:
I think I'll here re-tell it, if I may.
And therefore, every gentle soul, I pray
That for God's love you'll hold not what I say

65
Evilly meant, but that I must rehearse,
All of their tales, the better and the worse,
Or else prove false to some of my design.
Therefore, who likes not this, let him, in fine,
Turn over page and choose another tale:

70

For he shall find enough, both great and small,
Of stories touching on gentility,
And holiness, and on morality;
And blame not me if you do choose amiss.
The miller was a churl, you well know this;

75

So was the reeve, and many another more,
And ribaldry they told from plenteous store.
Be then advised, and hold me free from blame;
Men should not be too serious at a game.
Once on a time was dwelling in Oxford

80

A wealthy man who took in guests to board,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
A poor scholar was lodging with him there,
Who'd learned the arts, but all his phantasy
Was turned to study of astrology;

85

And knew a certain set of theorems
And could find out by various stratagems,
If men but asked of him in certain hours
When they should have a drought or else have showers,
Or if men asked of him what should befall

90

To anything; I cannot reckon them all.
This clerk was called the clever Nicholas;
Of secret loves he knew and their solace;
And he kept counsel, too, for he was sly
And meek as any virgin passing by.

95

He had a chamber in that hostelry,
And lived alone there, without company,
All garnished with sweet herbs of good repute;
And he himself sweet-smelling as the root
Of licorice, valerian, or setwall.

100

His Almagest, and books both great and small,
His astrolabe, belonging to his art,
His algorism stones - all laid apart
On shelves that ranged beside his lone bed's head;
His press was covered with a cloth of red.

105

And over all there lay a psaltery
Whereon he made an evening's melody,
Playing so sweetly that the chamber rang;
And Angelus ad virginem he sang;
And after that he warbled the King's Note:

110

Often in good voice was his merry throat.
And thus this gentle clerk his leisure spends
Supported by some income and his friends.
This carpenter had recently married a wife
Whom he loved more than he loved his life;

115

And she had become eighteen years of age.
Jealous he was and held her close in cage.
For she was wild and young, and he was old,
And deemed himself as like to be cuckold.
He knew not Cato, for his lore was rude:

120

That vulgar man should wed similitude.
A man should wed according to estate,
For youth and age are often in debate.
But now, since he had fallen in the snare,
He must endure, like other folk, his care.

125

Fair was this youthful wife, and therewithal
As weasel's was her body slim and small.
A girdle wore she, barred and striped, of silk.
An apron, too, as white as morning milk
About her loins, and full of many a gore;

130

White was her smock, embroidered all before
And even behind, her collar round about,
Of coal-black silk, on both sides, in and out;
The strings of the white cap upon her head
Were, like her collar, black silk worked with thread,

135

Her fillet was of wide silk worn full high:
And certainly she had a lickerish eye.
She'd thinned out carefully her eyebrows two,
And they were arched and black as any sloe.
She was a far more pleasant thing to see

140

Than is the newly budded young pear-tree;
And softer than the wool is on a wether.
Down from her girdle hung a purse of leather,
Tasselled with silk, with latten beading sown.
In all this world, searching it up and down,

145

So gay a little doll, I well believe,
Or such a wench, there's no man can conceive.
Far brighter was the brilliance of her hue
Than in the Tower the gold coins minted new.
And songs came shrilling from her pretty head

150

As from a swallow's sitting on a shed.
Therewith she'd dance too, and could play and sham
Like any kid or calf about its dam.
Her mouth was sweet as bragget or as mead
Or hoard of apples laid in hay or weed.

155 Skittish she was as is a pretty colt,
Tall as a staff and straight as cross-bow bolt.
A brooch she wore upon her collar low,
As broad as boss of buckler did it show;
Her shoes laced up to where a girl's legs thicken.

160

She was a primrose, and a tender chicken
For any lord to lay upon his bed,
Or yet for any good yeoman to wed
Now, sir, and then, sir, go befell the case,
That on a day this clever Nicholas

165

Fell in with this young wife to toy and play,
The while her husband was down Osney way,
Clerks being as crafty as the best of us;
And unperceived he caught her by the puss,
Saying: "Indeed, unless I have my will,

170

For secret love of you, sweetheart, I'll spill."
And held her hard about the hips, and how!
And said: "O darling, love me, love me now,
Or I shall die, and pray you God may save!"
And she leaped as a colt does in the trave,

175

And with her head she twisted fast away,
And said: "I will not kiss you, by my fay!
Why, let go," cried she, "let go, Nicholas!
Or I will call for help and cry 'alas!'
Do take your hands away, for courtesy!"

180

This Nicholas for mercy then did cry,
And spoke so well, importuned her so fast
That she her love did grant him at the last,
And swore her oath, by Saint Thomas of Kent,
That she would be at his command, content,

185

As soon as opportunity she could spy.
"My husband is so full of jealousy,
Unless you will await me secretly,
I know I'm just as good as dead," said she.
"You must keep all quite hidden in this case."

190

"Nay, thereof worry not," said Nicholas,
"A clerk has lazily employed his while
If he cannot a carpenter beguile."
And thus they were agreed, and then they swore
To wait a while, as I have said before.

195

When Nicholas had done thus every whit
And patted her about the loins a bit,
He kissed her sweetly, took his psaltery,
And played it fast and made a melody.
Then fell it thus, that to the parish church,

200

The Lord Christ Jesus' own works for to work,
This good wife went, upon a holy day;
Her forehead shone as bright as does the May,
So well she'd washed it when she left off work.
Now there was of that church a parish clerk

205

Whose name was (as folk called him) Absalom.
Curled was his hair, shining like gold, and from
His head spread fanwise in a thick bright mop;
'Twas parted straight and even on the top;

His cheek was red, his eyes grey as a goose;

210

With Saint Paul's windows cut upon his shoes,
He stood in red hose fitting famously.
And he was clothed full well and properly
All in a coat of blue, in which were let
Holes for the lacings, which were fairly set.

215

And over all he wore a fine surplice
As white as ever hawthorn spray, and nice.
A merry lad he was, so God me save,
And well could he let blood, cut hair, and shave,
And draw a deed or quitclaim, as might chance.

220

In twenty manners could he trip and dance,
After the school that reigned in Oxford, though,
And with his two legs swinging to and fro;
And he could play upon a violin;
Thereto he sang in treble voice and thin;

225

And as well could he play on his guitar.
In all the town no inn was, and no bar,
That he'd not visited to make good cheer,
Especially were lively barmaids there.
But, truth to tell, he was a bit squeamish

230

Of farting and of arrogant language.
This Absalom, who was so light and gay,
Went with a censer on the holy day,
Censing the wives like an enthusiast;
And on them many a loving look he cast,

235

Especially on this carpenter's goodwife.
To look at her he thought a merry life,
She was so pretty, sweet, and lickerous.
I dare well say, if she had been a mouse
And he a cat, he would have mauled her some.

240

This parish clerk, this lively Absalom
Had in his heart, now, such a love-longing

That from no wife took he an offering;
For courtesy, he said, he would take none.
The moon, when it was night, full brightly shone,

245

And his guitar did Absalom then take,
For in love-watching he'd intent to wake.
And forth he went, jolly and amorous,
Until he came unto the carpenter's house
A little after cocks began to crow;

250

And took his stand beneath a shot-window
That was let into the good wood-wright's wall.
He sang then, in his pleasant voice and small,
"Oh now, dear lady, if your will it be,
I pray that you will have some ruth on me,"

255

The words in harmony with his string-plucking.
This carpenter awoke and heard him sing,
And called unto his wife and said, in sum:
"What, Alison! Do you hear Absalom,
Who plays and sings beneath our bedroom wall?"

260

And she said to her husband, therewithal:
"Yes, God knows, John, I bear it, truth to tell."
So this went on; what is there better than well?
From day to day this pretty Absalom
So wooed her he was woebegone therefrom.

265

He lay awake all night and all the day;
He combed his spreading hair and dressed him gay;
By go-betweens and agents, too, wooed he,
And swore her loyal page he'd ever be.
He sang as tremulously as nightingale;

270

He sent her sweetened wine and well-spiced ale
And waffles piping hot out of the fire,
And, she being town-bred, mead for her desire.
For some are won by means of money spent,
And some by tricks, and some by long descent.

275

Once, to display his versatility,
He acted Herod on a scaffold high.
But what availed it him in any case?
She was enamoured so of Nicholas
That Absalom might go and blow his horn;

280

He got naught for his labour but her scorn.
And thus she made of Absalom her ape,
And all his earnestness she made a jape.
For truth is in this proverb, and no lie,
Men say well thus: It's always he that's nigh

285

That makes the absent lover seem a sloth.
For now, though Absalom be wildly wroth,
Because he is so far out of her sight,
This handy Nicholas stands in his light.
Now bear you well, you clever Nicholas!

290

For Absalom may wail and sing "Alas!"
And so it chanced that on a Saturday
This carpenter departed to Osney;
And clever Nicholas and Alison
Were well agreed to this effect: anon

295

This Nicholas should put in play a wile
The simple, jealous husband to beguile;
And if it chanced the game should go a-right,
She was to sleep within his arms all night,
For this was his desire, and hers also.

300

Presently then, and without more ado,
This Nicholas, no longer did he tarry,
But softly to his chamber did he carry
Both food and drink to last at least a day,
Saying that to her husband she should say -

305

If he should come to ask for Nicholas -
Why, she should say she knew not where he was,
For all day she'd not seen him, far or nigh;
She thought he must have got some malady,
Because in vain her maid would knock and call;

310

He'd answer not, whatever might befall.
And so it was that all that Saturday
This Nicholas quietly in chamber lay,
And ate and slept, or did what pleased him best,
Till Sunday when the sun had gone to rest.

315

This simple man with wonder heard the tale,
And marveled what their Nicholas might ail,
And said: "I am afraid, by Saint Thomas,
That everything's not well with Nicholas.
God send he be not dead so suddenly!

320

This world is most unstable, certainly;
I saw, today, the corpse being carried to church
Of one who, but last Monday, was at work.
Go up," said he unto his boy anon,
"Call at his door, or knock there with a stone,

325

Learn how it is and boldly come tell me."
The servant went up, then, right sturdily,
And at the chamber door, the while he stood,
He cried and knocked as any madman would -
"What! How! What do you, Master Nicholay?

330

How can you sleep through all the livelong day?"
But all for naught, he never heard a word;
A hole he found, low down upon a board,
Through which the house cat had been wont to creep;
And to that hole he stooped, and through did peep,

335

And finally he ranged him in his sight.
This Nicholas sat gaping there, upright,
As if he'd looked too long at the new moon.
Downstairs he went and told his master soon
In what array he'd found this self-same man.

340

This carpenter to cross himself began,
And said: "Now help us, holy Frideswide!
Little a man can know what shall betide.
This man is fallen, with his astromy,
Into some madness or some agony;

345

I always feared that somehow this would be!
Men should not meddle in God's privity.
Aye, blessed always be the ignorant man,
Whose creed is, all he ever has to scan!
So fared another clerk with astromy;

350

He walked into the meadows for to pry
Into the stars, to learn what should befall,
Until into a clay-pit he did fall;
He saw not that. But yet, by Saint Thomas,
I'm sorry for this clever Nicholas.

355

He shall be scolded for his studying,
If not too late, by Jesus, Heaven's King!
"Get me a staff, that I may pry before,
The while you, Robin, heave against the door.
We'll take him from this studying, I guess."

360

And on the chamber door, then, he did press.
His servant was a stout lad, if a dunce,
And by the hasp he heaved it up at once;
Upon the floor that portal fell anon.
This Nicholas sat there as still as stone,

365

Gazing, with gaping mouth, straight up in air.
This carpenter thought he was in despair,
And took him by the shoulders, mightily,
And shook him hard, and cried out, vigorously:
"What! Nicholay! Why how now! Come, look down!

370

Awake, and think on Jesus' death and crown!
I cross you from all elves and magic wights!"
And then the night-spell said he out, by rights,
At the four corners of the house about,
And at the threshold of the door, without: -

375

"O Jesus Christ and good Saint Benedict,
Protect this house from all that may afflict,
For the night hag the white Paternoster! -
Where hast thou gone, Saint Peter's sister?"
And at the last this clever Nicholas

380

Began to sigh full sore, and said: "Alas!
Shall all the world be lost so soon again?"
This carpenter replied: "What say you, then?
What! Think on God, as we do, men that swink."
This Nicholas replied: "Go fetch me drink;

385

And afterward I'll tell you privately
A certain thing concerning you and me;
I'll tell it to no other man or men."
This carpenter went down and came again,
And brought of potent ale a brimming quart;

390

And when each one of them had drunk his part,
Nicholas shut the door fast, and with that
He drew a seat and near the carpenter sat.
He said: "Now, John, my good host, lief and dear,
You must upon your true faith swear, right here,

395

That to no man will you this word betray;
For it is Christ's own word that I will say,
And if you tell a man, you're ruined quite;
This punishment shall come to you, of right,
That if you're traitor you'll go mad- and should!"

400

"Nay, Christ forbid it, for His holy blood!"
Said then this simple man: "I am no blab,
Nor, though I say it, am I fond of gab.
Say what you will, I never will it tell
To child or wife, by Him that harried Hell!"

405

"Now, John," said Nicholas, "I will not lie;
But I've found out, from my astrology,
As I have looked upon the moon so bright,
That now, come Monday next, at nine of night,
Shall fall a rain so wildly mad as would

410

Have been, by half, greater than Noah's flood.
This world," he said, "in less time than an hour,
Shall all be drowned, so terrible is this shower;
Thus shall all mankind drown and lose all life."
This carpenter replied: "Alas, my wife!

415

And shall she drown? Alas, my Alison!"
For grief of this he almost fell. Anon
He said: "Is there no remedy in this case?"
"Why yes, good luck," said clever Nicholas,
"If you will work by counsel of the wise;

420

You must not act on what your wits advise.
For so says Solomon, and it's all true,
'Work by advice and thou shalt never rue.'
And if you'll act as counselled and not fail,
I undertake, without a mast or sail,

425

To save us all, aye you and her and me.
Haven't you heard of, Noah, how saved was he,
Because Our Lord had warned him how to keep
Out of the flood that covered earth so deep?"
"Yes," said this carpenter, "long years ago."

430

"Have you not heard," asked Nicholas, "also
The sorrows of Noah and his fellowship
In getting his wife to go aboard the ship?
He would have rather, I dare undertake,
At that time, and for all the weather black,

435

That she had one ship for herself alone.
Therefore, do you know what would best be done?
This thing needs haste, and of a hasty thing
Men must not preach nor do long tarrying.
"Presently go, and fetch here to this inn

440

A kneading-tub, or brewing vat, and win
One each for us, but see that they are large,
Wherein we may swim out as in a barge,
And have therein sufficient food and drink
For one day only; that's enough, I think.

445

The water will dry up and flow away
About the prime of the succeeding day.
But Robin must not know of this, your knave,
And even Jill, your maid, I may not save;
Ask me not why, for though you do ask me,

450

I will not tell you of God's privy.
Suffice you, then, unless your wits are mad,
To have as great a grace as Noah had.
Your wife I shall not lose, there is no doubt,
Go, now, your way, and speedily about,

455

But when you have, for you and her and me,
Procured these kneading-tubs, or beer-vats, three,
Then you shall hang them near the roof-tree high,
That no man our purveyance may espy.
And when you thus have done, as I have said,

460

And have put in our drink and meat and bread,
Also an axe to cut the ropes in two
When the flood comes, that we may float and go,
And cut a hole, high up, upon the gable,
Upon the garden side, over the stable,

465

That we may freely pass forth on our way
When the great rain and flood are gone that day -
Then shall you float as merrily, I'll stake,
As does the white duck after the white drake.
Then I will call, 'Ho, Alison! Ho, John!

470

Be cheery, for the flood will pass anon.'
And you will say, 'Hail. Master Nicholay!
Good morrow, I see you well, for it is day!'
And then shall we be barons all our life
Of all the world, like Noah and his wife.

475

"But of one thing I warn you now, outright.
Be well advised, that on that very night
When we have reached our ships and got aboard,
Not one of us must speak or whisper word,
Nor call, nor cry, but sit in silent prayer;

480

For this is God's own bidding, hence- don't dare!
"Your wife and you must hang apart, that in
The night shall come no chance for you to sin
Either in looking or in carnal deed.
These orders I have told you, go, God speed!

485

Tomorrow night, when all men are asleep,
Into our kneading-tubs will we three creep
And sit there, still, awaiting God's high grace.
Go, now, your way, I have no longer space
Of time to make a longer sermoning.

490

Men say thus: 'Send the wise and say no thing.'
You are so wise it needs not that I teach;
Go, save our lives, and that I do beseech."
This foolish carpenter went on his way.
Often he cried "Alas!" and "Welaway!"

495

And to his wife he told all, privately;
But she was better taught thereof than he
How all this rigmarole was to apply.
Nevertheless she acted as she'd die,
And said: "Alas! Go on your way anon,

500

Help us escape, or we are lost, each one;
I am your true and lawfully wedded wife;
Go, my dear spouse, and help to save our life."
Lo, what a great thing is affection found!
Men die of imagination, I'll be bound,

505

So deep an imprint may the spirit take.
This hapless carpenter began to quake;
He thought now, verily, that he could see
Old Noah's flood come wallowing like the sea
To drown his Alison, his honey dear.

510

He wept, he wailed, he made but sorry cheer,
He sighed and made full many a sob and sigh.
He went and got himself a kneading-trough
And, after that, two tubs he somewhere found
And to his dwelling privately sent round,

515

And hung them near the roof, all secretly.
With his own hand, then, made he ladders three,
To climb up by the rungs thereof, it seems,
And reach the tubs left hanging to the beams;
And those he victualled, tubs and kneading-trough,

520

With bread and cheese and good juggled ale, enough
To satisfy the needs of one full day.
But ere he'd put all this in such array,
He sent his servants, boy and maid, right down
Upon some errand into London town.

525

And on the Monday, when it came on night,
He shut his door, without a candle-light,
And ordered everything as it should be.
And shortly after up they climbed, all three;
They sat while one might plow a furlong-way.

530

"Now, by Our Father, hush!" said Nicholay,
And "Hush!" said John, and "Hush!" said Alison.
This carpenter, his loud devotions done,
Sat silent, saying mentally a prayer,
And waiting for the rain, to hear it there.

535

The deathlike sleep of utter weariness
Fell on this wood-wright even, as I guess
About the curfew time, or little more;
For travail of his spirit he groaned sore,
And soon he snored, for badly his head lay.

540

Down by the ladder crept this Nicholay,
And Alison, right softly down she sped.
Without more words they went and got in bed
Even where the carpenter was wont to lie.
There was the revel and the melody!

545

And thus lie Alison and Nicholas,
In joy that goes by many an alias,
Until the bells for lauds began to ring
And friars to the chancel went to sing.
This parish clerk, this amorous Absalom,

550

Whom love has made so woebegone and dumb,
Upon the Monday was down Osney way,
With company, to find some sport and play;
And there he chanced to ask a cloisterer,
Privately, after John the carpenter.

555

This monk drew him apart, out of the kirk,
And said: "I have not seen him here at work.
Since Saturday; I think well that he went
For timber, that the abbot has him sent;
For he is wont for timber thus to go,

560

Remaining at the grange a day or so;
Or else he's surely at his house today;
But which it is I cannot truly say."
This Absalom right happy was and light,
And thought: "Now is the time to wake all night;

565

For certainly I saw him not stirring
About his door since day began to spring.
So may I thrive, as I shall, at cock's crow,
Knock cautiously upon that window low
Which is so placed upon his bedroom wall.

570

To Alison then will I tell of all
My love-longing, and thus I shall not miss
That at the least I'll have her lips to kiss.
Some sort of comfort shall I have, I say,
My mouth's been itching all this livelong day;

575

That is a sign of kissing at the least.
All night I dreamed, too, I was at a feast.
Therefore I'll go and sleep two hours away
And all this night then will I wake and play."
And so when time of first cock-crow was come,

580

Up rose this merry lover, Absalom,
And dressed him gay and all at point-device,
But first he chewed some licorice and spice
So he'd smell sweet, ere he had combed his hair.
Under his tongue some bits of true-love rare,

585

For thereby thought he to be more gracious.
He went, then, to the carpenter's dark house.
And silent stood beneath the shot-window;
Unto his breast it reached, it was so low;
And he coughed softly, in a low half tone:

590

"What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?
My cinnamon, my fair bird, my sweetie,
Awake, O darling mine, and speak to me!
It's little thought you give me and my woe,
Who for your love do sweat where'er I go.

595

Yet it's no wonder that I faint and sweat;
I long as does the lamb for mother's teat.
Truly, sweetheart, I have such love-longing
That like a turtle-dove's my true yearning;
And I can eat no more than can a maid."

600

"Go from the window, Jack-a-napes," she said,
"For, s'help me God, it is not 'come kiss me.'
I love another, or to blame I'd be,
Better than you, by Jesus, Absalom!
Go on your way, or I'll stone you therefrom,

605

And let me sleep, the fiends take you away!"
"Alas," quoth Absalom, "and welaway!
That true love ever was so ill beset!
But kiss me, since you'll do no more, my pet,
For Jesus' love and for the love of me."

610

"And will you go, then, on your way?" asked she,
"Yes truly, darling," said this Absalom.
"Then make you ready," said she, "and I'll come!"
And unto Nicholas said she, low and still:
"Be silent now, and you shall laugh your fill."

615

This Absalom plumped down upon his knees,
And said: "I am a lord in all degrees;
For after this there may be better still
Darling, my sweetest bird, I wait your will."
The window she unbarred, and that in haste.

620

"Have done," said she, "come on, and do it fast,
Before we're seen by any neighbour's eye."
This Absalom did wipe his mouth all dry;
Dark was the night as pitch, aye dark as coal,
And through the window she put out her hole.

625

And Absalom no better felt nor worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse
Right greedily, before he knew of this.
Aback he leapt- it seemed somehow amiss,
For well he knew a woman has no beard;

630

He'd felt a thing all rough and longish haired,
And said, "Oh fie, alas! What did I do?"
"Teehee!" she laughed, and clapped the window to;
And Absalom went forth a sorry pace.
"A beard! A beard!" cried clever Nicholas,

635

"Now by God's corpus, this goes fair and well!"
This hapless Absalom, he heard that yell,
And on his lip, for anger, he did bite;
And to himself he said, "I will requite!"
Who vigorously rubbed and scrubbed his lips

640

With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,
But Absalom, and often cried "Alas!
My soul I give now unto Sathanas,
For rather far than own this town," said he,
"For this despite, it's well revenged I'd be.

645

Alas," said he, "from her I never blenched!"
His hot love was grown cold, aye and all quenched;
For, from the moment that he'd kissed her arse,
For paramours he didn't care a curse,
For he was healed of all his malady;

650

Indeed all paramours he did defy,
And wept as does a child that has been beat.
With silent step he went across the street
Unto a smith whom men called Dan Jarvis,
Who in his smithy forged plow parts, that is

655

He sharpened shares and coulters busily.
This Absalom he knocked all easily,
And said: "Unbar here, Jarvis, for I come."
"What! Who are you?" "It's I, it's Absalom."
"What! Absalom! For Jesus Christ's sweet tree,

660

Why are you up so early? Ben'cite!
What ails you now, man? Some gay girl, God knows,
Has brought you on the jump to my bellows;
By Saint Neot, you know well what I mean."
This Absalom cared not a single bean

665

For all this play, nor one word back he gave;
He'd more tow on his distaff, had this knave,
Than Jarvis knew, and said he: "Friend so dear,
This red-hot coulter in the fireplace here,
Lend it to me, I have a need for it,

670

And I'll return it after just a bit."
Jarvis replied: "Certainly, were it gold
Or a purse filled with yellow coins untold,
Yet should you have it, as I am true smith;
But eh, Christ's foe! What will you do therewith?"

675

"Let that," said Absalom, "be as it may;
I'll tell you all tomorrow, when it's day"-
And caught the coulter then by the cold steel
And softly from the smithy door did steal
And went again up to the wood-wright's wall.

680

He coughed at first, and then he knocked withal
Upon the window, as before, with care.
This Alison replied: "Now who is there?
And who knocks so? I'll warrant it's a thief."
"Why no," quoth he, "God knows, my sweet roseleaf,

685

I am your Absalom, my own darling!
Of gold," quoth he, "I have brought you a ring;
My mother gave it me, as I'll be saved;
Fine gold it is, and it is well engraved;
This will I give you for another kiss."

690

This Nicholas had risen for a piss,
And thought that it would carry on the jape
To have his arse kissed by this jack-a-nape.
And so he opened window hastily,
And put his arse out thereat, quietly,

695

Over the buttocks, showing the whole bum;
And thereto said this clerk, this Absalom,
"O speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art."
This Nicholas just then let fly a fart
As loud as it had been a thunder-clap,

700

And well-nigh blinded Absalom, poor chap;
But he was ready with his iron hot
And Nicholas right in the arse he got.
Off went the skin a hand's-breadth broad, about,
The coulter burned his bottom so, throughout,

705

That for the pain he thought that he should die.
And like one mad he started in to cry,
"Help! Water! Water! For God's dear heart!"
This carpenter out of his sleep did start,
Hearing that "Water!" cried as madman would,

710

And thought, "Alas, now comes down Noel's flood!"
He struggled up without another word
And with his axe he cut in two the cord,
And down went all; he did not stop to trade
In bread or ale till he'd the journey made,

715

And there upon the floor he swooning lay.
Up started Alison and Nicholay
And shouted "Help!" and "Hello!" down the street.
The neighbours, great and small, with hastening feet
Swarmed in the house to stare upon this man,

720

Who lay yet swooning, and all pale and wan;
For in the falling he had smashed his arm.
He had to suffer, too, another harm,
For when he spoke he was at once borne down
By clever Nicholas and Alison.

725

For they told everyone that he was odd;
He was so much afraid of "Noel's" flood,
Through fantasy, that out of vanity
He'd gone and bought these kneading-tubs, all three,
And that he'd hung them near the roof above;

730

And that he had prayed them, for God's dear love,
To sit with him and bear him company.
The people laughed at all this fantasy;
Up to the roof they looked, and there did gape,
And so turned all his injury to a jape.

735

For when this carpenter got in a word,
'Twas all in vain, no man his reasons heard;
With oaths impressive he was so sworn down,
That he was held for mad by all the town;
For every clerk did side with every other.

740

They said: "The man is crazy, my dear brother."
And everyone did laugh at all this strife.
Thus screwed was the carpenter's goodwife,
For all his watching and his jealousy;
And Absalom has kissed her lower eye;

745

And Nicholas has burned his butt painfully.
This tale is done, and God save all the company!