

THE WIFE OF BATH'S  
PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Prologe of the Wyves Tale of Bathe*

5 'Experience, though noon auctoritee  
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me  
To speke of wo that is in mariage;  
For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,  
Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,  
Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve –  
If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee –  
And alle were worthy men in hir degree.  
10 But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is,  
That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but onis  
To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee,  
That by the same ensample taughte he me  
That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.  
Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones,  
15 Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,  
Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:  
"Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes," quod he,  
"And that like man that now hath thee  
Is noght thyn housbonde," thus seyde he certeyn.  
20 What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;  
But that I axe, why that the fifthe man  
Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?  
How manye myghte she have in mariage?  
Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age  
25 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.  
Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,  
But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,  
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;  
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.  
30 Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde  
Sholde lete fader and mooder and take to me.  
But of no nombre mencion made he,

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

*The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale*

'Even if there were nothing in the world written about it, first-hand experience would be quite sufficient for me to talk about the unhappiness that exists in marriage; because, gentlemen, thanks to eternal God, I have had, since the age of twelve, five husbands at the church door,<sup>1</sup> being so frequently married, and all of them were honourable men as befitted their status in society. But I was positively informed not long ago that, because Christ only once attended a wedding, in Cana of Galilee, he has instructed us by that example that we should be married only once. Hear, too, with what a sharp rebuke for the occasion, by a well, Jesus, [who was both] God and human being, spoke in reprimanding the Samaritan woman: "You have had five husbands," he said, "and that same man who possesses you now is not your husband." He definitely said that. What he meant by it I can't tell you. Nevertheless, I ask why the fifth man wasn't the Samaritan woman's fifth husband. How many could she marry? But I've never in my life heard stated what the limit on that number is. People may conjecture and make every possible interpretation, but I know definitely, without a doubt, that God commanded us to increase and multiply; that noble text I fully comprehend. And I know, too, that He said that my husband should forsake his father and mother and cleave to me. But He made no mention of number, [ . . . ]

1. The marriage service was conducted at the church door, followed by Mass in the church itself.

Of bigamy, or of octogamy;  
 Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye?  
 35 'Lo, heere the wise kyng, daun Salomon;  
 I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.  
 As wolde God it leful were unto me  
 To be refreshed half so ofte as he!  
 Which yifte of God hadde he for alle his wyvys!  
 40 No man hath swich that in this world alyve is.  
 God woot, this noble kyng, as to my wit,  
 The firste nyght had many a myrie fit  
 With ech of hem, so wel was hym on lyve.  
 Yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve!  
 44a [Of whiche I have pyked out the beste,  
 Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste:  
 Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,  
 And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes  
 Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;  
 44f Of fyve husbondes scoleiying am I.]  
 45 Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal.  
 For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al.  
 Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon,  
 Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon,  
 For thanne th'apostle seith that I am free  
 50 To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me.  
 He seith that to be wedded is no synne;  
 Bet is to be wedded than to brynne.  
 What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye  
 Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamy?  
 55 I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man,  
 And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan;  
 And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two,  
 And many another holy man also.  
 Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,  
 60 That hye God defended mariage  
 By expres word? I pray yow, telleth me.  
 Or where comanded he virginitee?  
 I woot as wel as ye, it is no drede,  
 Th'apostel, whan he speketh of maydenhede,

whether about getting married for a second time, or about marrying eight times. Why then should one talk about it disparagingly?

'Look here at the wise king, Lord Solomon; I believe he had more than one wife. It would, God willing, be pleasant for me to take a new partner even half as often as he did! What a gift from God he had to possess all those wives! No man living has a gift that can compare. God knows, this noble king, I imagine, had a jolly time with each of them on the first night, so fortunate was he in his lifetime. May God be praised that I have been wedded to five! I've chosen the best, with regard both to their 'lower purse'<sup>2</sup> and to their treasure-chests. Various academic faculties produce excellent scholars, and a variety of practical experience in a whole range of activity certainly makes a well-qualified workman; I am the product of instruction of five husbands. Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears! Because, I assure you, I don't want to keep myself all chaste. When my husband departs from this world, some Christian man must marry me straight away, because then, so says the Apostle, when I am free, I may, by God, marry whomsoever I please. He says that it is no sin to be married. Better to be married than to burn. Why should it worry me if people slander wicked Lamech<sup>3</sup> for his bigamy? I certainly know that Abraham was a holy man, and Jacob too, so far as I know, and each of them had more than two wives, as did many another holy man too. I ask you, tell me where can you see at any time that God on high specifically forbade marriage. Or where did he demand virginity? I know as well as you, beyond a doubt, that when the Apostle talked about virginity [ . . . ]

2. *nether purs* [44b]: i.e., scrotum (implying sexual prowess).

3. Lamech's story is told in Genesis 4:19-23.

65 He seyde that precept therof hadde he noon.  
 Men may conseil a womman to been oon,  
 But conseillyng is no comandement.  
 He putte it in oure owene juggement;  
 For hadde God comanded maydenhede,  
 70 Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede.  
 And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,  
 Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?  
 Poul dorste nat comanden, atte leeste,  
 A thyng of which his maister yaf noon heeste.  
 75 The dart is set up for virginitee;  
 Cacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see.  
 'But this word is nat taken of every wight,  
 But ther as God lust gyve it of his myght.  
 I woot wel that th'apostel was a mayde;  
 80 But natheless, thogh that he wroot and sayde  
 He wolde that every wight were swich as he,  
 Al nys but conseil to virginitee.  
 And for to been a wyf he yaf me leve  
 Of indulgence; so nys it no repreve  
 85 To wedde me, if that my make dye,  
 Withouten excepcion of bigamy.  
 Al were it good no womman for to touche –  
 He mente as in his bed or in his couche,  
 For peril is bothe fyr and tow t'assemble;  
 90 Ye knowe what this ensample may resemble.  
 This is al and som: he heeld virginitee  
 Moore parfit than weddyng in freletee.  
 Freletee clepe I, but if that he and she  
 Wolde leden al hir lyf in chastitee.  
 95 'I graunte it wel; I have noon envie,  
 Thogh maydenhede preferre bigamy.  
 It liketh hem to be clene, body and goost;  
 Of myn estaat I nyl nat make no boost,  
 For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,  
 100 He nath nat every vessel al of gold;  
 Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse.  
 God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse,

he said that he didn't have divine precept. You can advise a woman to be one, but recommending isn't commanding. He left it to our own judgement, because, had God commanded virginity, then by doing that he would be damning marriage. And, in fact, if no seeds were sown, where would virginity spring from? At any rate, Paul didn't dare to demand something that his master hadn't ordered. The prize of a dart is ordained for virginity; whoever can catch it, let them do so. Let's see who is the best runner.

'But this command isn't given to everyone, but to whomever God in his power wishes to give it. I fully recognize that the Apostle was a virgin; nevertheless, even though he wrote and stated that he wished everyone were like himself, it's only advising virginity. And he gave me leave to be a married woman by dispensation; so that, if my partner dies, there's no shame in marrying me, and no objection that it's bigamous. Even if it is good not to touch a woman – by which he means in his bed or on his couch – because there's danger in putting flame and flax together. You can see what this example implies, that's all there is to it: he considered virginity to be more perfect than wedding because of human weakness. I call it weakness, unless the man and the woman live their entire lives without sex.

'Fair enough: I don't hold any ill-will, even if virginity ranks above remarrying. It pleases them to be pure in body and soul. I don't claim any superiority for my way of life, because, as you well know, in the household of a lord not every vessel is made of pure gold. Some are of wood, and are useful to the lord. God calls people to him in various ways, [ . . . ]

And everich hath of God a propre yifte –  
Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte.

105 'Virginitee is greet perfeccion,  
And continece eek with devocion,  
But Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,  
Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle  
Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore,  
110 And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore.  
He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly;  
And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.  
I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age  
In the actes and in fruyt of mariage.  
115 'Telle me also, to what conclusion  
Were membres maad of generacion,  
And of so parfit wys a [wright] ywroght?  
Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght.  
Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun  
120 That they were maked for purgacioun  
Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale  
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,  
And for noon oother cause – say ye no?  
The experience woot wel it is noght so.  
125 So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,  
I sey this: that they maked ben for bothe;  
That is to seye, for office and for ese  
Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese.  
Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette  
130 That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?  
Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement,  
If he ne used his sely instrument?  
Thanne were they maad upon a creature  
To purge uryne, and eek for engendrure.  
135 'But I seye noght that every wight is holde,  
That hath swich harneys as I to yow tolde,  
To goon and usen hem in engendrure.  
Thanne sholde men take of chastitee no cure.  
Crist was a mayde and shapen as a man,  
140 And many a seint, sith that the world bigan;

and each person has a particular God-given gift – some have this, some that, as it pleases God to bestow.

'Virginity is an excellent state of perfection, and so, too, is moderation in sexual intercourse, and prayer. Nevertheless, Christ, the well of perfection, didn't tell everyone to go and sell all that he possessed and give it to the needy, and in that way to follow him and his footsteps. He was speaking to them who seek perfect living, and, begging your leave, gentlemēn, that's not me. I want to devote the prime of my life to the acts and rewards of marriage.

'Tell me, too, for what purpose were sexual organs made and fashioned by such a perfect and wise Creator? You can bet on it they weren't made for nothing. Interpret it however you like, and see how, whichever way you consider it, they were made for passing urine, and also both our small bits of equipment were made in order to distinguish a male from a female, and that is their sole purpose – do you deny that? Experience is well aware that that's not the case. If clerics won't be angry with me, I'll tell you this: they were made for both, that is to say, for useful function, and for the pleasure of procreation, in which we are not displeasing God. Otherwise, why should people have set down in their books that a man should pay his debt to his wife? How can he make such payment without using his pleasing tool? Thus they were made for the created being for urinating and for intercourse.

'But I'm not saying that every person who possesses the sexual organs I mentioned is compelled to go and use them in intercourse. Then one would be dismissing chastity. Christ was a virgin, and was created as a man, so too was many a saint since the beginning of the world. [...]

Yet lyved they evere in parfit chastitee.  
 I nyl envye no virginitee.  
 Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,  
 And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;  
 145 And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,  
 Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man.  
 In swich estaat as God hath cleped us  
 I wol persevere; I nam nat precius.  
 In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument  
 150 As frely as my Makere hath it sent.  
 If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!  
 Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,  
 Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette.  
 An housbonde I wol have – I wol nat lette –  
 155 Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,  
 And have his tribulacion withal  
 Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf.  
 I have the power durynge al my lyf  
 Upon his propre body, and noght he.  
 160 Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,  
 And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.  
 Al this sentence me liketh every deel' –  
 Up stirte the Pardoner, and that anon;  
 'Now, dame,' quod he, 'by God and by Seint John!  
 165 Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.  
 I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas!  
 What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere?  
 Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!  
 'Abyde!' quod she, 'my tale is nat bigonne.  
 170 Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,  
 Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.  
 And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale  
 Of tribulacion in mariage,  
 Of which I am expert in al myn age –  
 175 This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe –  
 Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe  
 Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.  
 Be war of it, er thou to ny approche;

Nevertheless, they lived all the time in perfect chastity. I have no wish to defame virginity. Let such be bread made of the pure grain of wheat, and let us wives be called barley-bread. Yet it was with barley loaves, as Mark informs us, that Our Lord Jesus fed many people. I shall continue in the state to which God has called me; I'm not fastidious. I shall use my instrument in marriage as liberally as the Creator gave it to me. God punish me if I'm niggardly! My husband can have it night and morning, whenever he wants to come and pay his debt. I want to have a husband – I won't hide the fact – who'll be the person who pays his "debt", and who is my servant, and have his physical affliction on his flesh so long as he's married to me. For my entire life, I have authority, and not he, over his own body. That's exactly how the Apostle explained it to me, and commanded our husbands to love us deeply. I go along with every detail of this opinion.'

Up jumped the Pardoner instantly: 'Now, madam,' he said, 'by God and by St John! You're a fine preacher on this topic. Unfortunately, I was on the point of marrying a wife. But why should I so dearly pay for it with my flesh? I'd rather marry no woman this year!'

'Hang on!' she said, 'I haven't started my story. No, you'll be drinking from another barrel, which will taste worse than beer, before I pack up. And when I've recounted my story of trouble in marriage, about which, given my years, I'm an expert – that is to say, I myself have been the scourge – then you can choose whether you want to take a sip of the barrel I'm opening. Be on your guard against it before you get too close; [... ]

For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.  
 180 "Whoso that nyl be war by othere men,  
 By hym shul othere men corrected be."  
 The same wordes writeth Ptholomee;  
 Rede in his *Almageste*, and take it there.'

185 'Dame, I wolde praye yow, if youre wyl it were,  
 Seyde this Pardoner, 'as ye bigan,  
 Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man,  
 And teche us yonge men of youre praktike.'

190 'Gladly,' quod she, 'sith it may yow like;  
 But yet I praye to al this compaignye,  
 If that I speke after my fantasye,  
 As taketh not agrief of that I seye,  
 For myn entente nys but for to pleye.

195 'Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale.  
 As evere moote I drynken wyn or ale,  
 I shal seye sooth; tho housbondes that I hadde,  
 As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.  
 The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;  
 Unnethe myghte they the statut holde  
 In which that they were bounden unto me.  
 200 Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee!  
 As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke  
 How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!  
 And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.

205 They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;  
 Me neded nat do lenger diligence  
 To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence.  
 They loved me so wel, by God above,  
 That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!

210 A wys womman wol bisye hire evere in oon  
 To gete hire love, ye, ther as she hath noon.  
 But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,  
 And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,  
 What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,  
 But it were for my profit and myn ese?

215 I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,  
 That many a nyght they songen "Weilawey!"

because I'll recount more than ten exemplary instances. "Whoever won't be warned by others' experiences, will become an example from which others will learn." Those are the very words Ptolemy wrote. Read it in his *Almageste*,<sup>4</sup> where you'll find it.'

'Madam,' said the Pardoner, 'I would like to request you to continue with your story which you have begun; don't hold back for anyone's sake, and instruct us young men in your technique.'

'Willingly,' she said, 'since it may please you; nevertheless, I ask all this group, if I speak as it pleases me, not to be upset by what I say, because my intention is just to amuse.'

'Now, sir, I'll carry on with my story. So may I ever drink wine or ale, I'll tell you the facts: of those husbands that were mine, three were good, two were bad. The three were good men, rich and old; they could scarcely perform the legal agreement by which they were married to me. By God, you know full well what I'm hinting at! God help me, I laugh when I think how pitifully I made them labour at night! And, in all honesty, I reckoned it was useless. They had given me their land and treasure; I had no need to strive any further to gain their love, or to flatter them. By God above, they loved me so much that I set no value on their love! A sensible woman is constantly busy in obtaining love, when she has none. But since I totally possessed them, and since they had made a present of all their land to me, why did I have to be at pains to please them, unless it was for my own profit and pleasure? I made them labour so hard, I swear, that many a night they cried "Oh, alas!" [...]

4 A treatise on astronomy by the Greek scholar Ptolemy.

The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,  
 That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe.  
 I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,  
 220 That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe,  
 To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre.  
 They were ful glad when I spak to hem faire,  
 For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously.

225 'Now herkneth hou I baar me proprely,  
 Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde.  
 Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde,  
 For half so boldely kan ther no man  
 Swere and lyen, as a womman kan.

I sey nat this by wyves that been wyse,  
 230 But if it be whan they hem mysavyse.  
 A wys wyf, if that she kan hir good,  
 Shal beren hym on honde the cow is wood,  
 And take witnessse of hir owene mayde  
 Of hir assent. But herkneth how I sayde:

235 "Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?  
 Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?  
 She is honoured overal ther she gooth;  
 I sitte at hoom; I have no thrifty clooth.  
 What dostow at my neighebores hous?  
 240 Is she so fair? Artow so amorous?  
 What rowne ye with oure mayde? Benedicite!  
 Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be!  
 And if I have a gossib or a freend,  
 Withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend,  
 245 If that I walke or pleye unto his hous!  
 Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous,  
 And prechest on thy bench, with yvel preef!  
 Thou seist to me it is a greet meschief  
 To wedde a povre womman, for costage;  
 250 And if that she be riche, of heigh parage,  
 Thanne seistow that it is a tormentrie  
 To soffre hire pride and hire malencolie.  
 And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,  
 Thou seyst that every holour wol hire have;

The side of bacon wasn't brought out for them, I believe, that some people get in Dunmow in Essex.<sup>5</sup> I controlled them so firmly under my rule that each of them was happy and eager to bring me pretty items from the fair. They were delighted when I spoke nicely to them, because, God knows, I cruelly chided them.

'Now, you clever wives who understand, hear how I personally behaved. You must speak in this way and falsely accuse them, because no man can avow and lie half as coolly as can a woman. I'm not talking about sensible wives, unless it should so be that they miscalculate. A wise wife, if she knows what's good for her, will deceive him by swearing that the crow that can speak [and reveal awkward facts] is crazy, and she'll produce the testament of her own maidservant, who will tell the same story. But hear what I said:

"You old dotard, is this your attitude? Why is our neighbour's wife so prettily dressed? She's respected wherever she goes. I sit at home. I haven't any suitable clothing. What do you do at the neighbour's house? Is she so beautiful? Are you so amorous? What do you whisper to our maidservant? Bless us! You old lecher, put an end to your tricks! And, if I have a companion or innocent friend, you scold me like a devil if I walk to or amuse myself at his house! You arrive home, drunk as a mouse, preaching at me on the bench, with not a shred of evidence! You tell me it's a terrible misfortune to marry a poor woman, because of the expense; and, if she's rich and of high birth, then you say it's a torment to put up with her pride and her moods. And if she's pretty, you absolute wretch, you say every lecher will have her; [...]

5. Couples who could prove that they had not argued for a year and a day were awarded a side of bacon (a flich). The custom continues today.

255 She may no while in chastitee abyde,  
That is assailed upon ech a syde.  
"Thou seyst som folk desiren us for richesse,  
Somme for oure shap, and somme for oure fairnesse,  
260 And som for she kan outhir synge or daunce,  
And som for gentillesse and daliaunce;  
Som for hir handes and hir armes smale;  
Thus goth al to the devel, by thy tale.  
Thou seyst men may nat kepe a castel wal,  
It may so longe assailed been overal.

265 "And if that she be foul, thou seist that she  
Coveiteth every man that she may se,  
For as a spaniel she wol on hym lepe,  
Til that she fynde som man hire to chepe.  
Ne noon so grey goos gooth ther in the lake  
270 As, seistow, wol been withoute make.  
And seyst it is an hard thyng for to welde  
A thyng that no man wole, his thanks, helde.  
Thus seistow, lorel, whan thow goost to bedde,  
And that no wys man nedeth for to wedde,  
275 Ne no man that entendeth unto hevене.  
With wilde thonder-dynt and firy levēne  
Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!

"Thow seyst that droppying houses, and eek smoke,  
And chidyng wyves maken men to flee  
280 Out of hir owene houses; a, benedicitee!  
What eyleth swich an old man for to chide?

"Thow seyst we wyves wol oure vices hide  
Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe –  
Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewe!

285 "Thow seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,  
They been assayed at diverse stoundes;  
Bacyns, lavours, er that men hem bye,  
Spoones and stooles, and al swich housbondrye,  
And so been pottes, clothes, and array;  
290 But folk of wyves maken noon assay,  
Til they be wedded – olde dotard shrewe! –  
And thanne, seistow, we wol oure vices shewe.

she won't remain chaste for a moment when she's assaulted from every direction.

"You say some people desire us because of our wealth, some for our figures, and some for our beauty, and some because the woman can either sing or dance, some for courtly behaviour and for intimate conversation; some for hands and delicate arms; so, according to you, everyone goes to the devil. You say one can't defend a castle wall, but in the end it will be stormed.

"And if the woman is unattractive, you say that she desires every man she sees, for she'll leap on him like a spaniel till she finds someone to buy her. Nor is there any goose on the lake there so drab that, according to you, will find itself without a mate. And you say that it's a difficult matter to control something that no one wants to keep. You say, you wretch, when you go to bed that no wise man needs to get married, nor any man who wishes to go to heaven. May your spotty neck be broken by a thunderbolt and flaming lightning!

"You say that leaky houses, and smoke too, and nagging wives make men flee from their own houses; oh, bless us! What's wrong with such an old man to criticize so?

"You say that we wives conceal our faults until we're married, and then we exhibit them – that's certainly the remark of a rascal! You say that oxen, asses, horses and dogs are all tried out at various times; basins, wash-bowls – prior to anyone purchasing them – spoons, stools, and all similar home utensils, pots as well, clothes and adornment; but people don't try out wives at all until they're married – you stupid old idiot! – and then, so say you, we display all our wickedness.

295 "Thou seist also that it displeth me  
 But if that thou wolt preyse my beautee,  
 And but thou poure alwey upon my face,  
 And clepe me 'faire dame' in every place.  
 And but thou make a feeste on thilke day  
 That I was born, and make me fressh and gay;  
 300 And but thou do to my norice honour,  
 And to my chamberere withinne my bour,  
 And to my fadres folk and his allyes –  
 Thus seistow, olde barel-ful of lyes!

305 "And yet of oure apprentice Janekyn,  
 For his crispe heer, shynynge as gold so fyn,  
 And for he squiereth me bothe up and down,  
 Yet hastow caught a fals suspecioun.  
 I wol hym noght, though thou were deed tomorwe!

310 "But tel me this: why hydestow, with sorwe,  
 The keyes of thy cheste away fro me?  
 It is my good as wel as thyn, pardee!  
 What, wenestow make an ydiot of oure dame?  
 Now by that lord that called is Seint Jame,  
 Thou shalt nat bothe, though that thou were wood,  
 Be maister of my body and of my good;  
 315 That oon thou shalt forgo, maugree thyne yen.  
 What helpith it of me to enquere or spyen?  
 I trowe thou woldest loke me in thy chiste!  
 Thou sholdest seye, 'Wyf, go wher thee liste;  
 Taak youre disport; I wol nat leve no talys.  
 320 I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys.'  
 We love no man that taketh kep or charge  
 Wher that we goon; we wol ben at oure large.

325 "Of alle men yblessed moot he be,  
 The wise astrologien, Daun Ptholome,  
 That seith this proverbe in his Almageste:  
 'Of alle men his wysdom is the hyeste  
 That rekketh nevere who hath the world in honde.'  
 By this proverbe thou shalt understonde,  
 Have thou ynogh, what thar thee recche or care  
 330 How myrily that othere folkes fare?

"You say, too, that I'm upset if you don't praise my beauty,  
 and if you don't gaze into my face, and call me 'lovely lady'  
 wherever we are; and if you don't have a party on my birthday,  
 and give me pretty new clothes; and if you don't speak nicely  
 to my nurse, and to the chambermaid in my bedroom, and to  
 my father's family and friends – so you say, you old barrel full  
 of lies!

"And yet you've started falsely suspecting Johnny, our  
 apprentice, because of his curly hair, shining like pure gold,  
 because he is in attendance on me. I don't desire him, even if  
 you were to die tomorrow!

"But tell me this: why do you hide the keys of your treasure-  
 chest from me, curse you? Good God, it's my possession as well  
 as yours. Are you trying to make the lady of the house look  
 stupid? Now, by the lord called St James, you're not going to  
 be master both of my body and my possessions, however furious  
 you become; do what you will,<sup>6</sup> you have to forgo one or the  
 other. Would it get me anywhere to ask or look [for the keys]?  
 I believe you'd lock me in your treasure-chest! You ought to  
 say, 'Wife, go wherever you wish; amuse yourself; I shan't  
 believe any gossip. I know you are a faithful wife, lady Alice.'  
 We don't love any man who watches or dictates where we go;  
 we want liberty.

"Of all men, the wise astronomer Master Ptolemy should  
 be honoured, who spoke this proverb in his *Almagest*: 'He who  
 possesses the greatest wisdom of all doesn't care who possesses  
 the world.' You should understand from this proverb that,  
 if you have sufficient, why should you bother or care how  
 prosperously other people live? [ . . . ]

6. *maugree thyne yen* [315]: literally, 'in spite of your eyes' and meaning  
 'do what you will'.

For, certeyn, olde dotard, by youre leve,  
 Ye shul have queynte right ynogh at eve.  
 He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne  
 A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;  
 335 He shal have never the lasse light, pardee.  
 Have thou ynogh, thee thar nat pleyne thee.

“Thou seyst also, that if we make us gay  
 With clothyng, and with precious array,  
 That it is peril of oure chastitee;  
 340 And yet – with sorwe! – thou most enforce thee,  
 And seye this wordes in the Apostles name:  
 ‘In habit maad with chastitee and shame  
 Ye wommen shul apparaille yow,’ quod he,  
 ‘And noight in tressed heer and gay perree,  
 345 As perles, ne with gold, ne clothes riche.’  
 After thy text, ne after thy rubriche,  
 I wol nat wirche as muchel as a gnat.

“Thou seydest this, that I was lyk a cat;  
 For whoso wolde senge a cattes skyn,  
 350 Thanne wolde the cat wel dwellen in his in;  
 And if the cattes skyn be slyk and gay,  
 She wol nat dwelle in house half a day,  
 But forth she wole, er any day be dawed,  
 To shewe hir skyn and goon a-caterwawed.  
 355 This is to seye, if I be gay, sire shrewe,  
 I wol renne out my borel for to shewe.

“Sire olde fool, what helpeth thee to spyen?  
 Thogh thou preye Argus with his hundred yen  
 To be my warde-cors, as he kan best,  
 360 In feith, he shal nat kepe me but me lest;  
 Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee!

“Thou seydest eek that ther been thynges thre,  
 The whiche thynges troublen al this erthe,  
 And that no wight may endure the ferthe.  
 365 O leeve sire shrewe, Jhesu shorte thy lyf!  
 Yet prechestow and seyst an hateful wyf  
 Yrekened is for oon of these meschances.  
 Been ther none othere maner resemblances

Because, certainly you old fool, if I may say so, you shall have plenty of cunt this evening. He is too much a miser who will refuse someone to light a candle at his lamp; God, it won't diminish the amount of light he has! If you've got sufficient, don't grumble.

“You say, too, that if we dress in rich clothes, and with expensive decoration, it puts our chastity in jeopardy; moreover – curse you! – you underline it by quoting these words in the name of the Apostle: ‘You women should clothe yourselves,’ he said, ‘in raiment made of chastity and modesty, and not with your hair styled and precious stones, such as pearls, or gold, or rich clothes.’<sup>7</sup> I'm not going to behave, even as much as a gnat, along the lines of your text or red-ink section-headings.

“You said this: that I was like a cat, because, should anyone singe a cat's fur, the cat will certainly stay in his house; whereas, should the cat's fur be sleek and shiny, she won't stay half a day inside, but she will go out before dawn to show off her fur and be off caterwauling. That is to say, if I'm attractive, Mister Misery, I run out to exhibit my poor clothes.

“You old fool, where is spying on me going to get you? Even if you ask Argus who, with his hundred eyes knows best how to be my guardian, I swear he couldn't keep me unless I chose; I'd certainly<sup>8</sup> trick him!

“You say there are three things that bring trouble to the whole world, and no one could endure a fourth.<sup>9</sup> Oh dear Mister Rascal, may Jesus shorten your life! On you preach, and say that a hateful wife is responsible for [at least] one of these misfortunes. Are there are no other similar cases [ . . . ]

7. From the first epistle of Paul the Apostle, I Timothy 2:9.
8. *so moot I thee* [361]: a very common tag, literally, ‘so may I thrive’, but becoming merely an intensive ‘positively’, ‘certainly’, and often used for the purpose of rhyme.
9. The reference (*via* Jerome) is to Proverbs 30:21–3.

That ye may likne youre parables to,  
But if a sely wyf be oon of tho?

370 "Thou liknest eek wommenes love to helle,  
To bareyne lond, ther water may nat dwelle.  
Thou liknest it also to wilde fyr;  
The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir  
375 To consume every thyng that brent wole be.  
Thou seyest, right as wormes shende a tree,  
Right so a wyf destroyeth hire housbonde;  
This knowe they that been to wyves bonde."

'Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde,  
380 Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde  
That thus they seyden in hir dronkenesse;  
And al was fals, but that I took witesse  
On Janekyn, and on my nece also.  
O Lord! The peyne I dide hem and the wo,  
385 Ful giltelees, by Goddes sweete pyne!  
For as an hors I koude byte and whyne.  
I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt,  
Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt.  
Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt;  
390 I pleyned first, so was oure werre ystynt.  
They were ful glade to excuse hem blyve  
Of thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyve.  
Of wenches wolde I beren hem on honde,  
Whan that for syk unnethes myghte they stonde.

395 'Yet tikled I his herte, for that he  
Wende that I hadde of hym so greet chiertee!  
I swoor that al my walkynge out by nyghte  
Was for t'espye wenchis that he dighte;  
Under that colour hadde I many a myrthe.  
400 For al swich wit is yeven us in oure byrthe;  
Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive  
To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve.  
And thus of o thyng I avaunte me:  
Atte ende I hadde the bettere in ech degree,  
405 By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thyng,  
As by continueel murmur or grucchyng.

that you can liken your proverbial stories to, without making an innocent wife one of them?

"Also, you liken women's love to hell, to waste-land where there is no water; you liken it, too, to a combustible chemical; the more it burns, the more it wants to consume anything that is flammable. You say that, just as caterpillars destroy a tree, even so does a wife destroy her husband; married men realize this."

'Noble people, in this very way, as you have seen, do I firmly try to convince my husbands that they spoke thus in their drunkenness; it was all concocted, but I got Johnny and also my niece to swear to it. O Lord, by the blessed suffering of God, the pain and misery I caused them, innocent as they were, because, like a horse I could bite and whinny. Guilty as I was, I did the accusing, otherwise I would many a time have been done for. He who arrives first at the mill grinds first. I got in my complaint first, so as to put an end to the argument. They were delighted to make a quick excuse for something of which they'd never in their lives been guilty. I'd accuse them about young women even at times when they were so ill that they could scarcely stand up.

'But I still delighted his heart, because he believed that I was so fond of him! I swore that when I went out for my strolls at night it was to watch out for his having sex with young women; under that disguise I had many a time of fun. Such intelligence is innate: deceitfulness, bursting into tears and skill in spinning God has given to women by instinct, for their entire lives. And so I boast about one thing: I ultimately got the better of them in every way, by cunning, or force, or some device such as by constant grumbling and complaining. [ . . . ]

Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce:  
 Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce;  
 I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,  
 410 If that I felte his arm over my syde,  
 Til he had maad his raunson unto me;  
 Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee.  
 And therefore every man this tale I telle,  
 Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle;  
 415 With empty hand men may none haukes lure.  
 For wynnynge wolde I al his lust endure,  
 And make me a feyned appetit;  
 And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit.  
 That made me that evere I wolde hem chide,  
 420 For thogh the pope hadde seten hem biside,  
 I wolde nat spare hem at hir owene bord,  
 For, by my trouthe, I quitte hem word for word.  
 As helpe me verray God omnipotent,  
 Though I right now sholde make my testament,  
 425 I ne owe hem nat a word that it nys quit.  
 I broghte it so aboute by my wit  
 That they moste yeve it up, as for the beste,  
 Or elles hadde we nevere been in reste;  
 For thogh he looked as a wood leon,  
 430 Yet sholde he faille of his conclusion.  
 'Thanne wolde I seye, "Goode lief, taak keep  
 How mekely looketh Wilkyn, oure sheep!  
 Com neer, my spouse, lat me ba thy cheke!  
 Ye sholde been al pacient and meke,  
 435 And han a sweete spiced conscience,  
 Sith ye so preche of Jobes pacience.  
 Suffreth alwey, syn ye so wel kan preche;  
 And but ye do, certein we shal yow teche  
 That it is fair to have a wyf in pees.  
 440 Oon of us two moste bowen, doutelees,  
 And sith a man is moore resonable  
 Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable.  
 What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?  
 Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?

They had a rotten time in bed particularly; there I would criticize and refuse sex; I wouldn't stay in the same bed if I felt his arm over my side until he had compensated me. Then I'd allow him to have his little bit of fun. And therefore I tell everyone this moral: win whoever will, because everything is up for grabs . . . you can't lure hawks without bait in your hand. In order to get money I would put up with all his urges, and would fake sexual pleasure, though I have never enjoyed dried meat. Thus I constantly rebuked them, for, even if the pope had sat next to them, I wouldn't leave off at their own dining-table, because, upon my word, I paid them back word for word. So may the true and omnipotent God help me, even if I were on the point of making my will, I don't owe them a word that I haven't paid back. I so manoeuvred matters through my cunning that they had better yield, or otherwise we would never have had any peace and quiet. So, even if he looked like an angry lion, he wouldn't get what he wanted.

'Then I would say, "Darling, see how meek Willie our sheep looks!<sup>10</sup> Come nearer, my husband, let me kiss your cheek! You ought to be all patient and meek and have a sweet and dainty conscience since you preach so much about the patience of Job. Always bear suffering patiently, because you preach so well [about it]; and, if you don't, we shall certainly teach you that it is nice to live with a quiet wife. One or the other has to give way, certainly, and, since man is more reasonable than woman, you must be the patient one. What's the problem that you grumble and groan so? Is it because you want my cunt all to yourself? [ . . . ]

10. It appears that her husband's name is William, and that she teasingly tells him he is being shy (sheepish).

445 Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel!  
 Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel;  
 For if I wolde selle my *belle chose*,  
 I koude walke as fressh as is a rose;  
 But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth.  
 450 Ye be to blame, by God! I sey yow sooth."  
 'Swiche manere wordes hadde we on honde.  
 Now wol I speken of my fourthe housbonde.  
 'My fourthe housbonde was a revelour –  
 This is to seyn, he hadde a paramour –  
 455 And I was yong and ful of ragerye,  
 Stibourn and strong, and joly as a pye.  
 How koude I daunce to an harpe smale,  
 And synge, ywis, as any nyghtyngale,  
 Whan I had dronke a draughte of sweete wyn!  
 460 Metellius, the foule cherl, the swyn,  
 That with a staf birafte his wyf hir lyf,  
 For she drank wyn, thogh I hadde been his wyf,  
 He sholde nat han daunted me fro drynke!  
 And after wyn on Venus moste I thynke,  
 465 For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl,  
 A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl.  
 In wommen vinolent is no defence –  
 This knowen lecchours by experience.  
 'But – Lord Crist! – whan that it remembreth me.  
 470 Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,  
 It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.  
 Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote  
 That I have had my world as in my tyme.  
 But age, allas, that al wole envenyme,  
 475 Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.  
 Lat go. Farewel! The devel go therwith!  
 The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle;  
 The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle;  
 But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde.  
 480 Now wol I tellen of my fourthe housbonde.  
 'I seye, I hadde in herte greet despit  
 That he of any oother had delit.

Okay, have it all! Go on, have every bit of it! By St Peter! I curse you if you don't love it dearly; because, if I wanted to sell my *belle chose*,<sup>11</sup> I could strut about fresh as a rose. But I'll keep it for your appetite alone. By God, you should be ashamed or yourself, I'm telling you straight."

"Those are the sorts of conversations we had. Now, I'll tell you about my fourth husband.

'My fourth husband was a wastrel – that is to say, he had a mistress – and I was young and full of sprightliness, stubborn and strong, and cheery as a magpie. How I danced to a little harp, and sang just like a nightingale, when I had drunk a cup of sweet wine! Even if I had been the wife of Metellius,<sup>12</sup> that disgusting boor, that pig, who killed his wife with a stick just because she drank wine, he wouldn't have scared me off drinking! And after drinking wine, I have to think about sex, because, just as surely as cold produces hail, a sensuous mouth has to have a sexy tail. Drunkenness in women lowers defences; lechers are well acquainted with that fact.

'But – Lord, Christ! – when I recall my youth, and my merry-making, it tickles me to the bottom of my heart. To this day it cheers my heart that I've had my world in my time. But age, alas, that poisons everything has taken from me my beauty and my vigour. Let it go! The devil can take it! The flour has fallen, that's the plain fact; so I'll have to sell the bran as best I can. But I'll strive to keep cheerful. Now I'll speak of my fourth husband.

'I say that I had much disdain in my heart if he should get pleasure from anyone else. [...]

11. French, 'pretty thing', a euphemism for genitalia.

12. The story is told in Maximus Valerius 6.3.

But he was quit, by God and by Seint Joice!  
 I made hym of the same wode a croce;  
 485 Nat of my body, in no foul manere,  
 But certainly, I made folk swich cheere  
 That in his owene grece I made hym frye  
 For angre, and for verray jalousye.  
 By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie,  
 490 For which I hope his soule be in glorie.  
 For, God it woot, he sat ful ofte and song,  
 Whan that his shoo ful bitterly hym wrong.  
 Ther was no wight, save God and he, that wiste,  
 In many wise, how soore I hym twiste.  
 495 He deyde whan I cam fro Jerusalem,  
 And lith ygrave under the roode beem,  
 Al is his tombe noght so curyus  
 As was the sepulcre of hym Daryus,  
 Which that Appelles wroghte subtilly;  
 500 It nys but wast to burye hym preciously.  
 Lat hym fare wel; God yeve his soule rest!  
 He is now in his grave and in his cheste.

'Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I telle.  
 God lete his soule nevere come in helle!  
 505 And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe;  
 That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,  
 And evere shal unto myn endyng day.  
 But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,  
 And therwithal so wel koude he me glose,  
 510 Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose*;  
 That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,  
 He koude wynne agayn my love anon.  
 I trowe I loved hym best, for that he  
 Was of his love daungerous to me.  
 515 We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,  
 In this matere a queynte fantasye:  
 Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,  
 Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.  
 Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;  
 520 Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.

But he was paid back, by God and St Judocus! I made him a cross of the same wood, not in any reprehensible use of my body, but I certainly gave such warm welcome to people that I made him fry in his own fat of anger and deep jealousy. By God, I was his purgatory on earth, through which I trust his soul is in glory. For, God knows, he sat and sang many a time when the shoe pinched him so painfully. No one but God and he knew how I tortured him by all sorts of means. He died when I returned from Jerusalem, and lies buried beneath the beam bearing the cross, even if his tomb isn't as elaborate as is the sepulchre of Darius which Appelles intricately wrought. Goodbye to him, God rest his soul! He's now in his grave and his coffn.

Now I'll tell you about my fifth husband. May God never allow his soul to go to hell! And yet he was the greatest rascal in the way he treated me; I can feel that all over my rib cage, and I shall till the day I die. But he was so vigorous and lively in our bed, and also knew so well how to coax me when he wanted my *belle chose*, that, even if he'd beaten every bone I had, he'd get my love back instantly. I suspect I loved him best because he played hard to get. We women have, if the truth be told, a weird turn of mind: you can observe that if there's something we can't get easily, we'll beg for it and long for it all day long. If you tell us we can't have something, then we'll want it. Try to force something on us, and we're off and away.

With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;  
 Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,  
 And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys:  
 This knoweth every womman that is wys.

525 'My fifthe housbonde – God his soule blesse! –  
 Which that I took for love, and no richesse,  
 He som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford,  
 And hadde left scole, and wente at hom to bord  
 With my gossib, dwellynge in oure toun;  
 530 God have hir soule! Hir name was Alisoun.  
 She knew myn herte, and eek my privetee,  
 Bet than oure parisshe preest, so moot I thee!  
 To hire biwreyed I my conseil al.  
 For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,  
 535 Or doon a thyng that sholde han cost his lyf,  
 To hire, and to another worthy wyf,  
 And to my nece, which that I loved weel,  
 I wolde han toold his conseil every deel.  
 And so I dide ful often, God it woot,  
 540 That made his face often reed and hoot  
 For verray shame, and blamed hymself for he  
 Had toold to me so greet a pryvetee.

'And so bifel that ones in a Lente –  
 So often tymes I to my gossyb wente,  
 545 For evere yet I loved to be gay,  
 And for to walke in March, Averill, and May,  
 Fro hous to hous, to heere sondry talys –  
 That Jankyn clerk, and my gossyb dame Alys,  
 And I myself, into the feeldes wente.  
 550 Myn housbonde was at Londoun al that Lente;  
 I hadde the bettre leyser for to pleye,  
 And for to se, and eek for to be seye  
 Of lusty folk. What wiste I wher my grace  
 Was shapen for to be, or in what place?  
 555 Therefore I made my visitaciouns  
 To vigilies and to processions,  
 To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages,  
 To pleyes of myracles, and to mariages,

When someone's mean to us, we offer all our goods. A big crowd at the market puts up the price of the goods, and when something is going too cheaply, it's reckoned to be worthless. Every sensible woman knows this.

'My fifth husband – God bless his soul! – whom I took for love not for money, was formerly a student at Oxford, and had left the university and returned to take lodgings with my good friend who lived in our town. God save her soul! Her name was Alison. She knew my heart and my secrets too, certainly better than the parish priest! I told her all my secrets, such as, if my husband had pissed on a wall, or done some deed that would have cost him his life, I would have told every detail of his secret to her, and to another good wife, and to my niece whom I dearly loved. And, God knows, I frequently did so, which often made his face blush for shame, and he cursed himself that he had divulged such deep secrets to me.

'I went frequently to my old friend, because I constantly looked for amusement, and I wandered from house to house in March, April and May to hear the gossip. And it so happened one Lent that the scholar Jankin, and my friend, mistress Alice, and I myself, went into the countryside. All that Lent my husband was in London. It gave me more opportunity to have fun, and to observe, and to be observed by pleasure-loving people. How did I know whether, or where, my fortune was destined? Consequently, I attended public gatherings on the days before religious festivals, religious processions, sermons too, and pilgrimages such as this, miracle plays and marriages; [ . . . ]

And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes.  
 560 These wormes, ne these motthes, ne these mytes,  
 Upon my peril, frete hem never a deel;  
 And wostow why? For they were used weel.  
 'Now wol I tellen forth what happed me.  
 I seye that in the feeldes walked we,  
 565 Til trewely we hadde swich daliance,  
 This clerk and I, that of my purveiance  
 I spak to hym and seyde hym how that he,  
 If I were wydwe, sholde wedde me.  
 For certainly – I sey for no bobance –  
 570 Yet was I nevere withouten purveiance  
 Of marriage, n'of othere thynges eek.  
 I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek  
 That hath but oon hole for to sterre to,  
 And if that faille, thanne is al ydo.  
 575 'I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me –  
 My dame taughte me that soutiltee –  
 And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,  
 He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,  
 And al my bed was ful of verray blood;  
 580 "But yet I hope that ye shal do me good,  
 For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught."  
 And al was fals; I dremed of it right naught,  
 But as I folwed ay my dames loore,  
 As wel of this as of othere thynges moore.  
 585 'But now, sire, lat me se what I shal seyn.  
 A ha! By God, I have my tale ageyn.  
 'Whan that my fourthe housbonde was on beere,  
 I weep algate, and made sory cheere,  
 As wyves mooten, for it is usage,  
 590 And with my coverchief covered my visage,  
 But for that I was purveyed of a make,  
 I wepte but smal, and that I undertake.  
 'To chirche was myn housbonde born a-morwe  
 With neighebores, that for hym maden sorwe;  
 595 And Jankyn,oure clerk, was oon of tho.  
 As help me God, whan that I saugh hym go

and I wore my bright scarlet robes. Worms, moths or insects, I swear on peril of my soul, didn't nibble at them one bit. You know why? It was because they had such constant use.

'Now I'll tell you straight what happened to me. I'm telling you that we went for walks in the fields until, to tell you the truth, we had such hanky-panky, this scholar and I, that I spoke to him about my plans, and told him that, were I to be widowed, he should marry me. For, indeed – I'm not saying this to boast – I was never without my marriage plans all mapped out, and other matters, too. I don't esteem mousy-heartedness to be worth a leek – like a mouse that has only one hole to bolt to, and should that fail, then it's done for.

'I played him along, telling him that he had laid a spell on me – mistress Alison<sup>13</sup> taught me that bit of cunning – and I said, too, that I had a dream about him the whole night that he wanted to murder me as I lay on my back, and that my bed was covered with real blood. "But still, I trust you will help me, because I've learned that blood is a symbol for wealth." And it was all made up, I hadn't dreamed about it at all, but I was just following my friend's advice, both in this and in other instances.

'But now, sir,<sup>14</sup> let me see what I should recount. Aha! By God, I remember where I'd got to in the story.

'When my fourth husband was on his bier, I wept constantly, and looked unhappy, as wives have to do because that's the custom, and I covered my face with my veil. But, because I had made prior arrangements for a new partner, I promise you I wept very little.

'In the morning, my husband was carried to the church, accompanied by the neighbours who mourned for him. One of those was our scholar, Johnny. God help me, when I watched him walking [...]

13. *My dame* [576] could mean 'my mother'. On the other hand, the Wife of Bath's friend and confidante, also called Alison, is referred to as 'dame' in line 548, and it seems very likely that it is she who had been giving our Alison these useful tips on catching a man.

14. *sire* [585]: this may be addressed to the Host. The Wife uses the same form of address to him at line 854.

After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire  
 Of legges and of feet so clene and faire  
 That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold.  
 600 He was, I trowe, twenty wynter oold,  
 And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth;  
 But yet I hadde alwey a coltes tooth.  
 Gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel;  
 I hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel.  
 605 As help me God, I was a lusty oon,  
 And faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon,  
 And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me,  
 I hadde the beste *quoniam* myghte be.  
 For certes, I am al Venerien  
 610 In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.  
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,  
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;  
 Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.  
 Allas, allas! That evere love was synne!  
 615 I folwed ay myn inclinacioun  
 By vertu of my constellacioun;  
 That made me I koude noght withdrawe  
 My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.  
 Yet have I Martes mark upon my face,  
 620 And also in another privee place.  
 For God so wys be my savacioun,  
 I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,  
 But evere folwede myn appetit,  
 Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;  
 625 I took no kep, so that he liked me,  
 How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.  
 'What sholde I seye but, at the monthes ende,  
 This joly clerk, Jankyn, that was so hende,  
 Hath wedded me with greet solempnytee,  
 630 And to hym yaf I al the lond and fee  
 That evere was me yeven therbifoore.  
 But afterward repented me ful soore;  
 He nolde suffre nothyng of my list.  
 By God, he smoot me ones on the lyst,

behind the bier, it seemed to me that he had such a pair of legs  
 and such beautiful, shapely feet that I yielded up my whole  
 heart to him. I believe he was twenty years old, and I was, to  
 be honest with you, forty. But I've always had youthful desire.  
 I was gap-toothed, and that suited me admirably; I bore the  
 imprint of Venus's seal.<sup>15</sup> God help me, I had powerful sexual  
 urges, and I was beautiful, rich, young, in a good position in  
 society, and indeed, as my husbands told me, I had the best  
 thingamajig that could ever be. That's doubtless because I'm  
 totally under the influence of the planet Venus in physical mat-  
 ters, and my heart is under the influence of Mars. Venus  
 endowed me with my sexual desire, my lecherousness, and  
 Mars gave me my resolute courage. The ascending planet in my  
 horoscope was Taurus, the Bull, with Mars there, too. Alas,  
 alas, that ever love should be thought a sin! Because of my birth  
 signs, I always followed my desires. The consequence was that  
 I couldn't keep Venus's private room<sup>16</sup> from a worthy lad. I've  
 still got a Martian birthmark on my face, and in another private  
 place, too. As God may certainly be my salvation, I didn't ever  
 love after careful thought, but just went along with my urges  
 the whole time, whether the guy were short, tall, black or white.  
 Provided he took to me, I didn't care how poor he was, or of  
 what social class either.

'There's no more to be said but that, at the end of a month,  
 this cheerful scholar, Johnny, who was so courteous, married  
 me with great pomp and circumstance, and I bequeathed to  
 him all the land and possessions that had ever been given to me  
 preiously. But I deeply regretted that later; he didn't choose  
 to allow any of my wishes. By God, he hit me once on the ear,

15. The seal of Venus was probably a purple birthmark on the thigh.

16. *chambre of Venus* [618]: a euphemism for 'vagina'.

635 For that I rente out of his book a leef,  
 That of the strook myn ere wax al deef.  
 Stibourn I was as is a leonesse,  
 And of my tonge a verray jangleresse,  
 And walke I wolde, as I had doon biforn,  
 640 From hous to hous, although he had it sworn;  
 For which he often tymes wolde preche,  
 And me of olde Romayn geestes teche;  
 How he Symplicius Gallus lefte his wyf,  
 And hire forsook for terme of al his lyf,  
 645 Noght but for open-heveded he hir say  
 Lookyngē out at his dore upon a day.  
 'Another Romayn tolde he me by name,  
 That, for his wyf was at a someres game  
 Withouten his wityng, he forsook hire eke.  
 650 And thanne wolde he upon his Bible seke  
 That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiaste  
 Where he comandeth and forbedeth faste  
 Man shal nat suffre his wyf go roule aboute.  
 Thanne wolde he seye right thus, withouten doute:  
 655 "Whoso that buyldeth his hous al of salwes,  
 And priketh his blynde hors over the falwes,  
 And suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes,  
 Is worthy to been hanged on the galwes!"  
 But al for noght, I sette noght an hawe  
 660 Of his proverbes n'of his olde sawe,  
 Ne I wolde nat of hym corrected be.  
 I hate hym that my vices telleth me,  
 And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I.  
 This made hym with me wood al outrelly;  
 665 I nolde noght forbere hym in no cas.  
 'Now wol I seye yow sooth, by Seint Thomas,  
 Why that I rente out of his book a leef,  
 For which he smoot me so that I was deef.  
 'He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day,  
 670 For his desport he wolde rede alway;  
 He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste,  
 At which book he lough alway ful faste.

because I'd torn out a page from his book, so that my ear became stone deaf because of that blow. I was stubborn as a lioness, and a true chatterbox, and I used to walk from house to house, just as I had always done, even if he had expressly commanded against it. On account of that, he would often give me a sermon, and teach me about ancient Roman stories, about how Simplicius Gallus left his wife, and had no more to do with her for his entire life, simply because he saw her looking out of the door one day without her head being covered.

'He named another Roman who also left his wife because she attended the midsummer revels without his knowledge. And then he'd hunt up that particular proverb in the Book of Ecclesiasticus in the Bible, where he gives a command to men, forbidding them in strongest terms against allowing their wives to roam freely. Then he would certainly pronounce like this:

"He who builds a house of willow branches, or spurs his blind horse over open countryside, or leaves his wife free to go on pilgrimages to shrines, is fit to be strung up on the gallows!" But all to no avail, because I didn't care a hawthorn berry for his proverbs or his old sayings, nor would I accept discipline from him. I hate anyone who informs me about my shortcomings, and, God knows, so do more of us [women] than just me. This made him furious with me; I refused to tolerate him in any instance.

Now, by St Thomas, I tell you honestly why I ripped a page from his book, because of which he hit me, and as a result I became deaf.

'He possessed a book that he always liked to read for his amusement, day and night. He called it *Valerius and Theophrates*, and he always found this book highly amusing.

And eek ther was somtyme a clerk at Rome,  
 A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome,  
 675 That made a book agayn Jovinian;  
 In which book eek ther was Tertulan,  
 Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys,  
 That was abbesse nat fer fro Parys,  
 And eek the Parables of Salomon,  
 680 Ovides Art, and bookes many on,  
 And alle these were bounden in o volume.  
 And every nyght and day was his custume,  
 Whan he hadde leysur and vacacioun  
 From oother worldly occupacioun,  
 685 To reden on this book of wikked wyves.  
 He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves  
 Than been of goode wyves in the Bible.  
 For trusteth wel, it is an impossible  
 That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,  
 690 But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,  
 Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.  
 Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?  
 By God, if wommen hadde written stories,  
 As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
 695 They wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse  
 Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.  
 The children of Mercurie and of Venus  
 Been in hir wirkyng ful contrarius;  
 Mercurie loveth wysdam and science,  
 700 And Venus loveth ryot and dispence.  
 And, for hire diverse disposicioun,  
 Ech falleth in otheres exaltacioun.  
 And thus, God woot, Mercurie is desolat  
 In Pisces, wher Venus is exaltat,  
 705 And Venus falleth ther Mercurie is reysed.  
 Therefore no womman of no clerk is preysed.  
 The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do  
 Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,  
 Thanne sit he down, and writ in his dotage  
 710 That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!

And also there was at one time a scholar in Rome, a cardinal,  
 called St Jerome, who wrote a book. *Against Jovinian*, in  
 [Johnny's] book there were also Tertullian, Crisippus, Trotula  
 and Heloise, who was an abbess near Paris, and also the  
*Proverbs of Solomon*, Ovid's *Art of Love*, and a great many  
 books, all these bound into one volume.<sup>17</sup> And his habit was  
 to study this book about wicked wives, every night and day,  
 whenever he had the leisure and the spare time from his other  
 daily business. He knew more tales and biographies of them  
 than there are about good wives in the Bible. Because, take my  
 word for it, it's impossible that any scholar speaks approvingly  
 about women, with the exception of the lives of Holy Saints,  
 but nothing whatever about any other woman. Who painted  
 the lion, just tell me that?<sup>18</sup> By God, had women written stories,  
 as clerics do in the rooms in which they pray and study, they  
 would have written more about men's wickedness than the  
 whole male race could atone for. The offspring of Mercury and  
 those of Venus are quite opposite in the way they function.  
 Mercury loves wisdom and learning, and Venus loves debauchery  
 and extravagance. And because of their different dispositions,  
 each falls when the other rises. Consequently, God knows,  
 Mercury is left powerless in the sign of Pisces [the fish],  
 when Venus is in the ascendant; and Venus falls when Mercury  
 rises. Therefore, no woman is praised by a cleric. When the  
 cleric has grown old and his sexual performance isn't worth an  
 old shoe, then in his weak old age he sits down and writes that  
 women are inconstant in marriage!

17. Both Theophrastes and Valerius wrote books against marriage. Jerome wrote *Against Jovinian* (Jovinian argued that marriage was not inferior to virginity); Tertullian wrote a work on chastity; Crisippus was an antifeminist writer mentioned in Jerome; Trotula was a female writer on gynaecology; Heloise was the lover and subsequent wife of Abelard, though she resisted the idea of marriage when she became pregnant by him, lest it should impede his ecclesiastical career; she later became abbess of the Paraclete nunnery, near Paris; Solomon's descriptions of perfect femininity appear in *Proverbs*; Ovid wrote *The Art of Love*, which contains antifeminist material.

18. The story, originally from Aesop, but repeated in the Middle Ages, is that a man shows a lion a sculpture – or a picture in later versions – of a lion that has been killed by a man (implying man's superiority). But the lion

'But now to purpos, why I tolde thee  
 That I was beten for a book, pardee!  
 Upon a nyght Jankyn, that was oure sire,  
 Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire,  
 715 Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse  
 Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,  
 For which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn,  
 That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.  
 Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde  
 720 That womman was the los of al mankynde.

'Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres:  
 Slepynge, his lemman kitte it with hir sheres;  
 Thurgh which treson loste he bothe his yen.

'Tho redde he me, if that I shal nat lyen,  
 725 Of Hercules and of his Dianyre,  
 That caused hym to sette hymself afyre.

'No thyng forgat he the care and the wo  
 That Socrates hadde with his wyves two,  
 How Xantippa caste pisse upon his heed.  
 730 This sely man sat stille as he were deed;  
 He wiped his heed, namoore dorste he seyn,  
 But "Er that thonder stynte, comth a reyn!"

'Of Phasipha, that was the queene of Crete,  
 For shrewednesse, hym thoughte the tale swete;  
 735 Fy! Spek namoore – it is a grisly thyng –  
 Of hire horrible lust and hir likyng.

'Of Clitermystra, for hire lecherye,  
 That falsly made hire housbonde for to dye,  
 He redde it with ful good devocioun.

'He tolde me eek for what occasioun  
 740 Amphiorax at Thebes loste his lyf.  
 Myn housbonde hadde a legende of his wyf,  
 Eriphilem, that for an ouche of gold  
 Hath prively unto the Grekes told  
 745 Wher that hir housbonde hidde hym in a place,  
 For which he hadde at Thebes sory grace.

'Of Lyvia tolde he me, and of Lucye:  
 They bothe made hir housbondes for to dye,

'But now, back to the reason why I told you that, because of a  
 book, by God, was I beaten. One night Johnny, the master of our  
 household, read his book while he was sitting by the fire: first of  
 all about Eve through whose wickedness the entire human race  
 was brought to grief, on account of which Jesus Christ himself,  
 who redeemed us with his heart's blood, was put to death. Look  
 here, you can clearly see, specifically with reference to a woman,  
 that a woman caused the downfall of the whole of mankind.

'Then hé read out to me how Samson was shorn of his hair:  
 his mistress cut it off with scissors while he was asleep, through  
 which treasonous act he lost both his eyes.

'Then, I'm not kidding, he read to me about Hercules and  
 Deianira, who was the cause of his setting himself on fire.

'He omitted nothing about the care and misery that Socrates  
 endured from his two wives, and how Xanippe threw urine  
 over his head. This noble man sat dead still, wiped his head,  
 and said simply, "Before thunder ceases, rain arrives!"<sup>19</sup>

'It seemed to him that the story of Pasiphae, Queen of Crete,  
 was attractive because of her evil. Stop! Don't even mention  
 her horrible lust and desire – it's a disgusting subject.<sup>20</sup>

'He read, with greatest interest, about Clytemnestra, who,  
 out of lust, treacherously engineered her husband's death.

'He also told me for what reason Amphiarus lost his life at  
 Thebes. My husband had a story about his wife, Eriphyle, who,  
 for a gold brooch, secretly informed the Greeks in what place  
 he was hiding, as a consequence of which he met with great  
 misfortune at Thebes.

'He told me about Livia and about Lucia. Each was the cause  
 of her husband's death, [ . . . ]

asks who painted the picture, i.e., is it the attitude of the artist, and not  
 necessarily the truth, that has determined the moral of the story?

19. This story illustrating Socrates' patience comes from St Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, where it says '*aqua immunda*' (dirty water), not necessarily urine, was poured on Socrates' head.

20. For the story of Samson shorn of his strength-giving hair by his wife, Delilah, see Judges 13-16. Deianira, married to Hercules, soaked his shirt in the blood of a centaur, innocently believing that it would restore his desire for her; the poison in the shirt rotted his flesh, and Hercules

That oon for love, that oother was for hate.  
 750 Lyvia hir housbonde, on an even late,  
 Empoysoned hath, for that she was his fo;  
 Lucia, likerous, loved hire housbonde so  
 That, for he sholde alwey upon hire thynke,  
 She yaf hym swich a manere love-drynke  
 755 That he was deed er it were by the morwe;  
 And thus algates housbondes han sorwe.  
 'Thanne tolde he me how oon Latumyus  
 Compleyned unto his felawe Arrius  
 That in his gardyn growed swich a tree  
 760 On which he seyde how that his wyves thre  
 Hanged himself for herte despitus.  
 "O leeve brother," quod this Arrius,  
 "Yif me a plante of thilke blissed tree,  
 And in my gardyn planted shal it bee."  
 765 'Of latter date, of wyves hath he red  
 That somme han slayn hir housbondes in hir bed,  
 And lete hir lecchour dighte hire al the nyght,  
 Whan that the corps lay in the floor upright.  
 And somme han dryve nayles in hir brayn,  
 770 Whil that they slepte, and thus they had hem slayn.  
 Somme han hem yeve poyssoun in hire drynke.  
 He spak moore harm than herte may bithynke,  
 And therwithal he knew of mo proverbes  
 Than in this world ther growen gras or herbes.  
 775 "Bet is," quod he, "thyn habitacioun  
 Be with a leon or a foul dragoun,  
 Than with a womman usynge for to chyde.  
 Bet is," quod he, "hye in the roof abyde,  
 Than with an angry wyf down in the hous;  
 780 They been so wikked and contrarious,  
 They haten that hir housbondes loven ay."  
 He seyde, "A womman cast hir shame away,  
 Whan she cast of hir smok"; and forthermo,  
 "A fair womman, but she be chaast also,  
 785 Is lyk a gold ryng in a sowes nose."  
 Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,

one out of love, the other out of hatred. Late one evening, Livia  
 poisoned her husband, because she was his enemy; the sexually  
 hungry Lucia, so loved her husband that, in order to make him  
 constantly obsessed with her, she gave him such a kind of  
 love-potion that he died before dawn.<sup>21</sup> Thus it is that husbands  
 are always unhappy.

'Then he told me how someone called Latumius sadly told  
 his friend Arrius that a particular tree grew in his garden on  
 which his three wives had hanged themselves with hearts full  
 of spite.<sup>22</sup> "O dear brother," said Arrius, "give me a cutting  
 from that blessed tree, and it will be planted in my garden."

'From more recent times, he had read things about wives –  
 that some had murdered their husbands in bed, and allowed  
 their lovers to have sex with them all night, while the corpse  
 was lying face upwards on the floor. Some had driven nails  
 through their husbands' brains while they were asleep, and  
 murdered them in that way. Some had given them poison in  
 their drink. He spoke more damagingly than you could con-  
 ceive, and over and above all that he knew more proverbial  
 sayings than there are grasses or herbs in the whole world.  
 "Preferable to have your dwelling with a lion or horrible  
 dragon, than with a woman who makes a practice of nagging  
 . . . Better high in the roof," he said, "than down in the house  
 with an angry wife: they are so evil and contrary that they  
 always hate whatever their husbands love . . . A woman casts  
 aside her modesty," he said, "the moment she casts aside her  
 petticoat." And, then again, "A beautiful woman, if she is not  
 also sexually chaste, is like a golden ring in the nose of a sow."  
 Who could possibly believe, or who could imagine, [ . . . ]

made a fire and burnt himself to death. Pasiphae lusted after a bull and  
 from that liaison gave birth to the Minotaur.

21. Clytemnestra took a lover while her husband, Agamemnon, was at the  
 siege of Troy; on his return, she murdered him. Eriphyle, wife of Amphia-  
 raus, persuaded him to fight against Thebes, even though he foretold this  
 would result in his death. Livia was the daughter of Nero and lover of  
 Sejanus; after his death, she was accused of adultery with him and of  
 having poisoned her husband; she was put to death. Lucia was the wife  
 of the Roman poet Lucretius.

22. The story of the hanging tree occurs in Walter Map, *De Nugis curialium*,

The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?

'And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne

To reden on this cursed book al nyght,

790

Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght

Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke

I with my fest so took hym on the cheke

That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.

And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,

795

And with his fest he smoot me on the heed

That in the floor I lay as I were deed.

And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,

He was agast and wolde han fled his way,

Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.

800

"O! hastow slayn me, false thief?" I seyde,

"And for my land thus hastow mordred me?

Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee."

'And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,

And seyde, "Deere suster Alisoun,

805

As help me God, I shal thee nevere smyte!

That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte.

Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke!"

And yet eftsoones I hitte hym on the cheke,

And seyde, "Theef, thus muchel am I wreke;

810

Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke."

But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,

We fille acorded by us selven two.

He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,

To han the governance of hous and lond,

815

And of his tonge, and of his hond also;

And made hym brenne his book anon right tho.

And whan that I hadde geten unto me,

By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,

And that he seyde, "Myn owene trewe wyf,

820

Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;

Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat -"

After that day we hadden never debaat.

God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde

As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,

the misery and the torment that were in my heart?

'And when I realized that he would never stop reading his damned book all night long, all of a sudden I ripped three leaves from his book, even as he was reading it, and I also struck him with my fist so hard on the side of the face that he tumbled backwards into our fire. And he got up like a furious lion and hit me on the head with his fist so that I lay on the floor as if I was dead. And when he saw how motionless I was, he was scared and wanted to make a bolt for it, until I finally came to. "O! Have you killed me, you dishonest thief?" I said. "And have you murdered me like this to get possession of my goods? Nevertheless, I want to kiss you before I die."

'And he came close, and gently knelt down, and said, "My dear wife, Alison, so help me God, I'll never hit you [again]! What I did is your fault. Forgive me, I beg you!" Nevertheless, I struck him straight away on the cheek, and said, "You thief, I can get this bit of revenge. Now I'm going to die, I can speak no more." But finally, with a great deal of grief and misery, we made an agreement between the two of us. He gave me the reins to hold absolutely, to have the running of the household and the estate, and over how he spoke to me and touched me; and I made him burn his book on the spot. And when, by having the upper hand, I'd got all authority for myself, he said, "My own true wife, do as you please for the rest of your life; keep your good name and my money too." From that day onwards we never had a quarrel. God knows, I was as nice to him as any wife from Denmark to India, [ . . . ]

in an account of the advice given by one friend to another dissuading him from marriage. Map died c. 1208/9.

825 And also trewe, and so was he to me.  
I prey to God, that sit in magestee,  
So blesse his soule for his mercy deere.  
Now wol I seye my tale, if ye wol heere.'

*Biholde the wordes bitwene the  
Sombnour and the Frere*

830 The Frere lough, whan he hadde herd al this;  
'Now dame,' quod he, 'so have I joye or blis,  
This is a long preamble of a tale!  
And whan the Somonour herde the Frere gale,  
'Lo,' quod the Somonour, 'Goddess armes two!  
A frere wol entremette hym everemo.  
835 Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere  
Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere.  
What spekestow of preambulacioun?  
What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit down!  
Thou lettest oure disport in this manere.'  
840 'Ye, woltow so, sire Somonour?' quod the Frere;  
'Now, by my feith I shal, er that I go,  
Telle of a somonour swich a tale or two  
That alle the folk shal laughen in this place.'  
'Now elles, Frere, I bishrewe thy face,'  
845 Quod this Somonour, 'and I bishrewe me,  
But if I telle tales two or thre  
Of freres er I come to Sidingborne  
That I shal make thyn herte for to morne,  
For wel I woot thy pacience is gon.'  
850 Oure Hooste cride 'Pees! And that anon!  
And seyde, 'Lat the womman telle hire tale.  
Ye fare as folk that dronken ben of ale.  
Do, dame, telle forth youre tale, and that is best.'  
'Al redy, sire,' quod she, 'right as yow lest,  
855 If I have licence of this worthy Frere.'  
'Yis, dame,' quod he, 'tel forth, and I wol heere.'

*Heere endeth the Wyf of Bathe  
hir Prologe*

and true to him as well, just as he was to me. I pray God who sits in majesty out of his sweet mercy to bless his soul. Now, if you'll pay attention, I'll tell my tale.'

*Here is the exchange of words between the  
Summoner and the Friar*

When the Friar heard all this, he laughed. 'Now, madam,' he said, 'so grant me joy and happiness, this is a prolonged preamble to a story!' And when the Summoner heard the Friar shout out, he said, 'By God's two arms! A friar constantly interferes. See, good people, a fly and also a friar will drop into every dish and every business too. What's this "prolonged preamble" you're talking about? Eh? Amble, or trot, or shut up and go and sit down! You're spoiling our entertainment by going on like this.'

'Okay, if that's how you want it, Mister Summoner?' said the Friar. 'Now, I swear, before we depart I'll tell a tale or two about a Summoner so that everyone here will have a laugh.'

'Otherwise, Friar, curse your face,' said the Summoner, 'and curse me too if I can't tell a few stories about friars before I reach Sittingbourne, that will make you feel miserable, because I know full well that you've lost your temper.'

Our Host cried out, 'Quiet, at once!' And he said, 'Let the woman tell her story. You're behaving like a couple of drunkards. Do tell your tale, madam, that is best.'

'I'm all prepared, sir,' she said, 'just as you please, if this worthy Friar grants me official permission.'

'Yes, lady,' said he. 'Carry on with the story, and I'll pay attention.'

*Here ends the Wife of Bath's Prologue*

*Heere bigynneth the Tale of  
the Wyf of Bathe*

In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,  
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,  
Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.  
860 The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,  
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.  
This was the olde opinion, as I rede;  
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.  
But now kan no man se none elves mo,  
865 For now the grete charitee and prayeres  
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,  
That serchen every lond and every stroom,  
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,  
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,  
870 Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,  
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes –  
This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.  
For ther as wont to walken was an elf  
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself  
875 In undermeles and in morwenynges,  
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges  
As he gooth in his lymytacioun.  
Wommen may go sauflly up and down.  
In every bussh or under every tree  
880 Ther is noon oother incubus but he,  
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.  
And so bifel that this kyng Arthour  
Hadde in his hous a lusty bacheler,  
That on a day cam ridynge fro ryver,  
885 And happed that, allone as he was born,  
He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,  
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,  
By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed;

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

*Here begins the Wife of Bath's Tale*

In the ancient days of King Arthur, about which the Celtic people speak with much reverence, this country was filled with fairy-folk. The Queen of the Elves, with her merry company, often danced in many a green meadow. This was the general belief, I think. I'm talking about many hundreds of years ago. But these days no one can see the elves any more, because now the great devotion and prayers of the friars,<sup>23</sup> who haunt every forest and river, numerous as the specks in a sun-beam, blessing the fine residences, private rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, cities, towns, castles, high towers, villages, barns, stables, dairies – all results in there being no fairies, because, where an elf used to walk, now the begging-friar himself walks, late morning and early morning, reciting the service for matins, and his holy texts, as he walks about in his licensed begging area. Women can walk about safely. In every bush and under every tree, the only spirit which copulates with sleeping women they'll come across is the friar. And he'll treat them only in a way that demeans them.

It so happened that King Arthur had in his household a pleasure-loving retainer, who came riding from the river one day, and it so chanced that, while he was riding alone, he saw a young woman walking in front of him. From this young woman, in spite of her resistance, he violently stole her virginity.

23. *lymytours* [866]: friaries had allotted areas where their friars could beg; these areas were subdivided into limits that denoted the territorial boundaries within which a particular friar could beg.

890 For which oppressioun was swich clamour  
 And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour  
 That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,  
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed –  
 Paraventure swich was the statut tho –  
 But that the queene and other ladyes mo  
 895 So longe preyeden the kyng of grace  
 Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,  
 And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,  
 To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille.

The queene thanketh the kyng with al hir myght,  
 900 And after this thus spak she to the knyght,  
 Whan that she saugh hir tyme, upon a day:  
 'Thou standest yet,' quod she, 'in swich array  
 That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.  
 I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me  
 905 What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.  
 Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!  
 And if thou kanst nat tellen it anon,  
 Yet wol I yeve thee leve for to gon  
 A twelf-month and a day, to seche and leere  
 910 An answeere suffisant in this mateere;  
 And suretee wol I han, er that thou pace,  
 Thy body for to yelden in this place.'

Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh;  
 But what! He may nat do al as hym liketh.  
 915 And at the laste he chees hym for to wende  
 And come agayn, right at the yeres ende,  
 With swich answeere as God wolde hym purveye;  
 And taketh his leve, and wendeth forth his weye.

He seketh every hous and every place  
 920 Where as he hopeth for to fynde grace  
 To lerne what thyng wommen loven moost,  
 But he ne koude arryven in no coost  
 Wher as he myghte fynde in this mateere  
 Two creatures accordyng in-feere.  
 925 Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse,  
 Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse,

Such outcry and submission were made to King Arthur on account of this rape that the knight was condemned to death, in accordance with the law, and was to be beheaded – evidently that was the legal ruling at that time – were it not that the queen, and other ladies also, so persistently begged the king for mercy that eventually he spared his life there, and handed him over to the queen, for her to decide whether to choose to save him or take his life.

The queen earnestly thanked the king, and then one day, when she saw a suitable opportunity, she spoke to the knight: 'There you live,' she said, 'in such a plight that you have no guarantee of your life. I grant you life, provided that you can tell me what thing it is that women most desire. Be careful, and preserve your neck bone from the iron [blade]! And if you can't tell me the answer straight away, I'll give you, nevertheless, permission to leave for a year and a day, to search and to acquire a full answer to this subject. And, as a pledge before your departure, I will have your body, to be handed over in this place.'

The knight was sad, and he sighed unhappily. But so what? He can't do as he chooses. And finally he decided to leave and to return at the very end of the year, with such an answer as God provided him with; and he took his leave and set out on his journey.

He sought out every house and every place where he hoped for the good fortune to learn what women most desire, but he was unable to come to any region where he might find two people who held the same view about this subject. Some said that women like wealth more than anything; some said respect; some said merrymaking; [ . . . ]

Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde,  
And oftetye to be wydwe and wedde.

930 Somme seyde that oure hertes been moost esed  
Whan that we been yflatered and yplesed.  
He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye.  
A man shal wynne us best with flaterye,  
And with attendance and with bisynesse  
935 Been we ylymed, bothe moore and lesse.

And somme seyen that we loven best  
For to be free and do right as us lest,  
And that no man repreve us of oure vice,  
But seye that we be wise and no thyng nyce.  
For trewely ther is noon of us alle,  
940 If any wight wol clawe us on the galle,  
That we nel kike, for he seith us sooth.  
Assay, and he shal fynde it that so dooth;  
For, be we never so vicious withinne,  
We wol been holden wise and clene of synne.

945 And somme seyn that greet delit han we  
For to been holden stable, and eek secree,  
And in o purpos stedefastly to dwelle,  
And nat biwreye thyng that men us telle.  
But that tale is nat worth a rake-stele.  
950 Pardee, we wommen konne no thyng hele;  
Witnesse on Myda – wol ye heere the tale?

Ovyde, amonges othere thynges smale,  
Seyde Myda hadde, under his longe heres,  
Growynge upon his heed two asses eres,  
955 The whiche vice he hydde as he best myghte  
Ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,  
That, save his wyf, ther wiste of it namo.  
He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;  
He preyede hire that to no creature  
960 She sholde tellen of his disfigure.

She swoor him, 'Nay'; for al this world to wynne,  
She nolde do that vileynye or synne,  
To make hir housbonde han so foul a name.  
She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.

some, expensive clothes; some said sexual pleasure, and often to be widowed and re-married. Some said that we get the greatest pleasure when we're flattered and pandered to. That's not far from the truth, to be honest with you. A man will easiest win us over with flattery, and we're ensnared,<sup>24</sup> all of us, with attention and fussing over.

And some said that we most desire to be unrestricted and do what we want, and that no man should chide us for our transgression, but tell us instead that we are wise and not at all foolish. But in fact there's not a single one of us who won't kick back if anyone touches us on a sore spot, when the man has told us something that is the true fact. Just try it, and he'll find that's what happens, because, inwardly wicked as we may be, we want to be considered wise and pure.

And some people say that what we really enjoy is a reputation for steadfastness and discretion, always being reliable, and not betraying [secrets] that we are told. But that account isn't worth a rake-handle! God, we women can't keep anything [confidential]! Take Midas for an example – do you want to hear his story?

Ovid, among other little stories, said that Midas had, growing under his long hair, two ass's ears, which deformity he, to the best of his ability, cunningly concealed from everyone's sight, so that, with the exception of his wife, no one knew about it. He loved her above anything, and trusted her, too. He begged her that she should reveal his disfigurement to no one.

She vowed that she wouldn't; not for the whole world would she do such an injury or wicked deed, to bring disrepute on her husband. She didn't want to recount it for her own embarrassment. [...]

<sup>24</sup> *ylymed* [934]: trapped with bird-lime (a sticky substance, baited with food, to ensnare birds); *moore and lesse*: literally, 'the most and least important in society', a common tag, meaning 'everybody', 'all'.

965 But natheless, hir thoughte that she dyde  
 That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde;  
 Hir thoughte it swal so soore aboute hir herte  
 That nedely som word hire moste asterte;  
 And sith she dorste telle it to no man,  
 970 Doun to a mareys faste by she ran –  
 Til she cam there hir herte was afyre –  
 And as a bitore bombleth in the myre,  
 She leyde hir mouth unto the water doun:  
 ‘Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,’  
 975 Quod she; ‘to thee I telle it and namo;  
 Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!  
 Now is myn herte al hool; now is it oute.  
 I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute.’  
 Heere may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde,  
 980 Yet out it moot; we kan no conseil hyde.  
 The remenant of the tale if ye wol heere,  
 Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it leere.  
 This knyght, of which my tale is specially,  
 Whan that he saugh he myghte nat come therby –  
 985 This is to seye, what wommen love moost –  
 Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost.  
 But hoom he gooth; he myghte nat sojourne;  
 The day was come that homward moste he tourne.  
 And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,  
 990 In al this care, under a forest syde,  
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go  
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;  
 Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,  
 In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.  
 995 But certeinly, er he cam fully there,  
 Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.  
 No creature saugh he that bar lyf,  
 Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf –  
 A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.  
 1000 Agayn the knyght this olde wyf gan ryse,  
 And seyde, ‘Sire knyght, heer forth ne lith no wey.  
 Tel me what that ye seken, by youre fey!’

Nevertheless, it seemed to her that she would die because she had to keep a secret so long. It seemed to her to be swelling so painfully in her heart that some detail of it would have to emerge from her. And, because she didn't dare tell anyone living, she ran quickly down to the marsh – until she arrived there, her heart was burning – and, like a bittern booming in the mire, she put her mouth to the water: ‘Don't betray me, water, with your noise,’ she said. ‘I'm telling it only to you: my husband has two long ass's ears! Now my heart is quite healed: now I have unloaded it. I really couldn't keep it in any longer.’ By this you can see that, though we hold on for a long while, nevertheless it has to come out. We can't keep a secret. If you want to hear the rest of the story, read Ovid, and you can learn about it there.

This knight, who is the particular subject of my tale, when he recognized that he couldn't discover it – that is to say, what women most desire – was heartily dispirited. But off he went home; he couldn't linger any longer, because the day for his return had arrived. It so chanced that, as he was riding along the path by the edge of a forest, full of all this anxiety, he observed a dance of twenty-four or more ladies, and he eagerly made his way towards the dance, in the hope that he might learn something wise. But, indeed, before he could get close, the dancers vanished, he had no idea where. He saw no living creature, apart from a woman he noticed sitting on the ground – you couldn't imagine someone more ugly. At the knight's approach, the old woman stood up and said, ‘There is no route beyond here; tell me truly what you are looking for. [ . . . ]’

Paraventure it may the better be;  
These olde folk kan muchel thyng,' quod she.

1005 'My leeve mooder,' quod this knyght, 'certeyn  
I nam but deed but if that I kan seyn  
What thyng it is that wommen moost desire.  
Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire.'  
1010 'Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand,' quod she,  
'The nexte thyng that I requere thee,  
Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght,  
And I wol telle it yow er it be nyght.'

'Have heer my trouthe,' quod the knyght, 'I grante.'  
1015 'Thanne,' quod she, 'I dar me wel avante  
Thy lyf is sauf, for I wol stonde therby;  
Upon my lyf, the queene wol seye as I.  
Lat se which is the proudeste of hem alle  
That wereth on a coverchief or a calle  
That dar seye nay of that I shal thee teche.  
1020 Lat us go forth withouten lenger speche.'  
Tho rowned she a pistel in his ere,  
And bad hym to be glad and have no fere.

Whan they be comen to the court, this knyght  
Seyde he had holde his day, as he hadde hight,  
1025 And redy was his answeere, as he sayde.  
Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,  
And many a wydwe, for that they been wise,  
The queene hirself sittyng as a justise,  
Assembled been, his answeere for to heere;  
1030 And afterward this knyght was bode appeere.

To every wight comanded was silence,  
And that the knyght sholde telle in audience  
What thyng that worldly wommen loven best.  
This knyght ne stood nat stille as doth a best,  
1035 But to his questioun anon answerde  
With manly voys, that al the court it herde:

'My lige lady, generally,' quod he,  
1040 'Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee  
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,  
And for to been in maistrie hym above.

Maybe that would be to your advantage. Old people know a lot of things,' she said.

'My dear mother,' said the knight, 'I'm a dead man for sure unless I can say what it is that women most desire. If you could teach me, I would handsomely reward you.'

'Give me your word of honour, shake hands on it,' she said, 'that the next thing I ask of you, you will do, if it lies within your power, and I'll let you know before nightfall.'

'Take my word for it,' said the knight, 'I promise.'

'Then,' said she, 'I can safely avow that your life is safe. I guarantee that. Upon my life, the queen will agree with me. We'll see who is the most arrogant of them all, who wears a headdress or hair-braid, that dares to deny what I'll teach you. Let us go on without any more talk.' Then she whispered a communication in his ear, and told him to cheer up and not be frightened.

When they arrived at the court, the knight stated that he had kept his date as promised, and he said he was ready with his answer. Many a noble wife, and many a young virgin, and many a widow (because they are wise), the queen herself, sitting as a judge, had assembled to hear his answer. And this knight was summoned to appear.

They were all commanded to be silent, so that the knight could state to the assembly what thing women most desire. The knight didn't stand silent as a beast, but instantly answered the question with a bold voice, so that the whole court heard him:

'My liege lady,' he said, 'women as a rule desire to have dominion, whether over their husbands or their lovers, and to be in authority over them. [ . . . ]

This is youre mooste desir, thogh ye me kille.  
 Dooth as yow list; I am heer at youre wille.  
 In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde,  
 Ne wydwe that contraried that he sayde,  
 1045 But seyden he was worthy han his lyf.  
 And with that word up stirte the olde wyf,  
 Which that the knyght saugh sittynge on the grene:  
 'Mercy,' quod she, 'my sovereyn lady queene!  
 Er that youre court departe, do me right.  
 1050 I taughte this answer unto the knyght;  
 For which he plighte me his trouthe there,  
 The firste thyng that I wolde hym requere  
 He wolde it do, if it lay in his myghte.  
 Bifore the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght,  
 1055 Quod she, 'that thou me take unto thy wyf,  
 For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf.  
 If I seye fals, sey nay, upon thy fey!'

This knyght answerde, 'Allas and weylawey!  
 I woot right wel that swich was my biheste.  
 1060 For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste!  
 Taak al my good and lat my body go.'

'Nay, thanne,' quod she, 'I shrewe us bothe two!  
 For thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore  
 I nolde for al the metal, ne for oore  
 1065 That under erthe is grave or lith above,  
 But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love.'

'My love?' quod he, 'nay, my dampnacioun!  
 Allas, that any of my nacioun  
 Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!  
 1070 But al for noght; the ende is this, that he  
 Constreynd was; he nedes moste hire wedde,  
 And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde.

Now wolden som men seye, paraventure,  
 That for my negligence I do no cure  
 1075 To tellen yow the joye and al th'array  
 That at the feeste was that ilke day.  
 To which thyng shortly answeren I shal:  
 I seye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al;

This is your greatest desire; even if you execute me. Do what you will; I am here at your command.' In the whole court there was no one, married or unmarried, or widow, who disagreed with what he said; but said that he deserved to keep his life. And at that verdict up got the old woman, whom the knight had seen sitting on the grass. 'A favour,' she said, 'my sovereign lady, my Queen! Before the court disperses, give me justice. I taught the knight this answer, for which he then gave me his word of honour that he would do, if it lay within his power, the first thing I required of him. With the court as witness, then, I ask you, Sir Knight,' she said, 'that you take me to be your wife, because you know full well that I have preserved your life. If I am lying, refuse me, upon your honour!'

The knight answered, 'Alas, woe is me! I know full well that was my promise. For the love of God, make a different request! Take all my goods, and leave my body free.'

'No, then,' said she, 'I curse us both! Because, although I am repulsive, and old and poor, I wouldn't want all the metal or gold buried in the ground or lying on the surface, were I not your wife and your beloved, too.'

'My beloved?' he said. 'No, my damnation! Alas that any of my family should be so appallingly socially shamed!' But, all to no avail. The conclusion was that he was under an obligation: he had to marry her, and accept his aged wife and bed her.

Now maybe some people will say that I'm lazily not bothering to tell you about the happiness and the preparations that were made that day for the wedding-feast. I'll briefly respond to that: I tell you, there was no happiness or festivity at all. [ . . . ]

1080 Ther nas but hevynesse and mucche sorwe.  
 For prively he wedded hire on morwe,  
 And al day after hidde hym as an owle,  
 So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule.

1085 Greet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thoght,  
 Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought;  
 He walweth and he turneth to and fro.  
 His olde wyf lay smyllynge everemo,  
 And seyde, 'O deere housbonde, benediciteel  
 Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?  
 Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?  
 1090 Is every knyght of his so dangerous?  
 I am youre owene love and youre wyf;  
 I am she which that saved hath youre lyf,  
 And, certes, yet ne dide I yow nevere unright;  
 Why fare ye thus with me this firste nyght?  
 1095 Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit.  
 What is my gilt? For Goddes love, tel it,  
 And it shal been amended, if I may.'

'Amended?' quod this knyght, 'Allas, nay, nay!  
 It wol nat been amended nevere mo.  
 1100 Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,  
 And therto comen of so lough a kynde,  
 That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.  
 So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!'

'Is this,' quod she, 'the cause of youre unreste?'

1105 'Ye, certainly,' quod he, 'no wonder is.'

'Now, sire,' quod she, 'I koude amende al this,  
 If that me liste, er it were dayes thre,  
 So wel ye myghte bere yow unto me.'

1110 'But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse  
 As is descended out of old richesse,  
 That therfore sholden ye be gentil men,  
 Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.  
 Looke who that is moost vertuouse alway,  
 Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay  
 1115 To do the gentil dedes that he kan;  
 Taak hym for the grettest gentil man.'

There was nothing but grief and deep sorrow, for he had secretly married her in the morning, and hidden himself away all day long like an owl, so miserable was he that she looked so ugly.

The knight's mind was full of misery, when he was led to bed with his wife. He tossed and turned. His old wife lay there smiling all the time, and she said, 'Dear husband, God bless us! Does every knight behave as you do with his wife? Is this the custom in King Arthur's house? Is every one of his knights so standoffish? I am your own beloved and your wife. I am she who saved your life. And I've certainly never done you any wrong. Why are you behaving like this with me on our first night? You are acting like a madman. What have I done wrong? Tell me, for the love of God, and I'll put it right if I can.'

'Put it right?' said the knight, 'Alas, no, no! It can never be put right. You are so loathsome, and so old, too, and, moreover, you are from such base stock, that it's little wonder that I toss and turn. I would to God that my heart would break in pieces!'

'Is this,' she said, 'the reason for your disquiet?'

'Yes, of course,' he said. 'That's obvious.'

'Now, sir,' she said, 'I could put all this right within three days if I wanted to, so that you might behave pleasantly to me.'

'But you're talking about nobility as if it is something that is descended from families who have been prosperous for many years, and hence you must be people of refined behaviour. Such presumption isn't worth a hen. Look at the person who is always most virtuous, whether privately or in public, and is the most determined to perform the noblest actions he can: take him for the person of greatest nobility of character. [...]

Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,  
 Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse.  
 For though they yeve us al hir heritage,  
 1120 For which we clayme to been of heigh parage,  
 Yet may they nat biquethe for no thyng  
 To noon of us hir vertuouse lyvynge,  
 That made hem gentil men ycalled be,  
 And bad us folwen hem in swich degree.

1125 'Wel kan the wise poete of Florence,  
 That highte Dant, spoken in this sentence.  
 Lo, in swich maner rym is Dantes tale:  
 "Ful selde up riseth by his branches smale  
 Prowesse of man; for God, of his goodnesse,  
 1130 Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse";  
 For of oure eldres may we no thyng clayme  
 But temporel thyng, that man may hurte and mayme.

'Eek every wight woot this as wel as I,  
 If gentillesse were planted natureelly  
 1135 Unto a certeyn lynage down the lyne,  
 Pryvee and apert thanne wolde they nevere fyne  
 To doon of gentillesse the faire office;  
 They myghte do no vileynye or vice.

'Taak fyr and ber it in the derkeste hous  
 1140 Bitwix this and the mount of Kaukasous,  
 And lat men shette the dores and go thenne;  
 Yet wole the fyr as faire lye and brenne  
 As twenty thousand men myghte it biholde;  
 His office natureel ay wol it holde,  
 1145 Up peril of my lyf, til that it dye.

'Heere may ye se wel how that genterye  
 Is nat annexed to possessioun,  
 Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun  
 Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde.  
 1150 For, God it woot, men may wel often fynde  
 A lordes sone do shame and vileynye;  
 And he that wole han pris of his genterye,  
 For he was boren of a gentil hous  
 And hadde his eldres noble and vertuouse,

Christ wishes us to acknowledge that our nobility of character comes from him, not from our ancestors because they are born into prosperity, because even if they bequeath us all their estate, as a consequence of which we claim that we are of noble lineage, it still isn't possible for them to leave to any of us their virtuous behaviour, because of which they were considered noble and they commanded us to follow their example.

'The wise poet of Florence, called Dante, spoke well in this authoritative opinion. See how Dante's story is in this kind of versified rhyme: "Rarely does man's noble integrity arise through his own little family tree, because God wants us to recognize that our nobility is from him." For, from our ancestors we can inherit nothing but worldly goods, which can be hurt and damaged.

'So too does everyone know as well as I that, if nobility of character were naturally planted into a particular family tree through its lineage, then its members would never cease, whether in private or in public, to perform the fine actions of a noble character; they wouldn't be able to act churlishly or wickedly.

'Take fire, and transport it into the darkest house between here and the Caucasian Mountains, and have someone shut the doors and leave. The fire will still lie burning splendidly so that twenty thousand people could view it; I swear on my life, it will retain its natural function until it burns out.

'By this you can see that noble integrity is not linked to possessing wealth, since people don't act unwaveringly [in a noble manner], as the fire acts consistently according to its nature. Because, God knows, one can often enough find the son of a lord acting shamefully and churlishly. He who wants to receive respect for his nobility, because he was born into a noble dynasty and possesses noble and virtuous ancestors, [ . . . ]

1155 And nel hymselfen do no gentil dedis  
 Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,  
 He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,  
 For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl.  
 For gentillesse nys but renomee  
 1160 Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,  
 Which is a strange thyng to thy persone.  
 Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone.  
 Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace;  
 It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place.  
 1165 'Thenketh hou noble, as seith Valerius,  
 Was thilke Tullius Hostillius,  
 That out of poverté roos to heigh noblesse.  
 Reedeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece;  
 Ther shul ye seen expres that it no drede is  
 1170 That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis.  
 And therefore, leeve housbonde, I thus conclude:  
 Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,  
 Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,  
 Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.  
 1175 Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne  
 To lyven vertuously and weyve synne.  
 'And ther as ye of poverté me repreeve,  
 The hye God, on whom that we bileeve,  
 In wilful poverté chees to lyve his lyf.  
 1180 And certes every man, mayden, or wyf  
 May understonde that Jhesus, hevене kyng,  
 Ne wolde nat chese a vicious lyvyng.  
 Glad poverté is an honest thyng, certeyn;  
 This wole Senec and othere clerkes seyn.  
 1185 Whoso that halt hym payd of his poverté,  
 I holde hym riche, al hadde he nat a sherte.  
 He that coveiteth is a povre wight,  
 For he wolde han that is nat in his myght;  
 But he that noght hath, ne coveiteth have,  
 1190 Is riche, although ye holde hym but a knave.  
 Verray poverté, it syngeth proprely;  
 Juvenal seith of poverté myrily:

but himself has no desire to act nobly, or to imitate his dead ancestors, is not noble, be he duke or earl, because the wicked actions of a villainous man place him at the bottom of the social order. Nobility is only the reputation of your ancestors, because of their outstanding goodness, and that is foreign to your personality. Your nobility comes only from God. Through God's grace, then, comes our true nobility; it's not something bequeathed to us by our station in society.

'Consider, as Valerius mentions,<sup>25</sup> how noble was Tullius Hostillius, who rose out of poverty to high rank. Read in Seneca, and Boethius, too: there you could see unambiguously that there is no question that the person who does noble deeds is noble. In consequence, dear husband, this is my summing up: even though my ancestors were unsophisticated, nevertheless, God on high, so I trust, will give me the grace to live virtuously. Then I become a noble woman the moment I begin to live virtuously and to forsake evil.

'And whereas you despise me for my poverty, God on high, in whom we believe, chose to live his life in voluntary poverty. And certainly every man, girl or married woman can understand that Jesus, the King of Heaven, wouldn't choose a wicked status in society. Happy poverty is, indeed, an honest thing. So say Seneca and other scholars. Whoever considers himself satisfied in his poverty, I consider to be rich, albeit he doesn't possess a shirt. He who covets is a pauper, because he wants to have what he can't; but he who has nothing, and doesn't covet possessions, is rich, even if you consider him to be a mere peasant. True poverty can, by its own nature sing! Juvenal facetiously makes a remark about poverty: [ . . . ]

25. Valerius Maximus tells the story of Tullius Hostillius, who was, in legend, a herdsman who became King of Rome.

1195 "The povre man, whan he goth by the weye,  
 Bifore the theves he may synge and pleye."  
 Poverte is hateful good and, as I gesse,  
 A ful greet bryngere out of bisynesse;  
 A greet amendere eek of sapience  
 To hym that taketh it in pacience.  
 1200 Poverte is this, although it seme alenge:  
 Possessioun that no wight wol chalenge.  
 Poverte ful ofte, whan a man is lowe,  
 Maketh his God and eek hymself to knowe.  
 Poverte a spectacle is, as thynketh me,  
 Thurgh which he may his verray freendes see.  
 1205 And therfore, sire, syn that I noght yow greve,  
 Of my poverte namoore ye me repreve.  
 'Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;  
 And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee  
 Were in no book, ye gentils of honour  
 1210 Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour  
 And clepe hym fader, for youre gentillesse:  
 And auctours shal I fynden, as I gesse.  
 'Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old,  
 Than drede you noght to been a cokewold;  
 1215 For filthe and eelde, also moot I thee,  
 Been grete wardeyns upon chastitee.  
 But nathelees; syn I knowe youre delit,  
 I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit.  
 'Chese now,' quod she, 'oon of these thynges tweye:  
 1220 To han me foul and old til that I deye,  
 And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,  
 And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,  
 Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,  
 And take youre aventure of the repair  
 1225 That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,  
 Or in som oother place, may wel be.  
 Now chese yourselven, wheither that yow liketh.'  
 This knyght avyseth hym and sore siketh,  
 But atte laste he seyde in this manere:  
 1230 'My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,

"A poor man, walking along the road, can sing and amuse himself in the presence of thieves." Poverty is unpleasant but a virtue, I suspect, because it greatly encourages industriousness; a great improver, too, of wisdom for the person who accepts it with patience. This is poverty, loathsome though it may appear; something that no one wishes to have. Poverty, very often, when someone is at rock bottom, forces him to know his God and to know himself. Poverty is, so it seems to me, a lens through which you can see who your true friends are. And therefore, sir, because I don't do you any harm, don't criticize me any more on account of my poverty.

'Now, sir, you chide me for being old; and indeed, sir, even if no author had written it in a book, you of the noble class, out of respect, dictate that one should behave politely to an old person and address him as "father", in keeping with your refined manners. And I think it likely that I can find written authorities [on this matter].

'Thus, as you see, I am ugly and old, so you needn't be apprehensive that you will be cuckolded, because dirtiness and old age, believe me, are powerful guardians of chastity. Nevertheless, because I realize you have sexual urges, I shall satisfy your physical desires.

'Choose now,' she said, 'one or other of these two things: to have me ugly and old all my life, and to be a faithful and humble wife to you, and never to displease you for the whole of my life, or, on the other hand, do you want me young and beautiful, and take a risk on who may be the visitors to your house because I'm there; or it could be at some other rendezvous. Now you may choose whichever one you wish.'

The knight contemplated and sighed painfully, but finally he spoke as follows: 'My lady and my beloved, and my very dear wife, [. . . ]

I put me in youre wise governance;  
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance  
And moost honour to yow and me also.

I do no fors the wheither of the two,  
1235 For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.'

'Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie,' quod she,  
'Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?'

'Ye, certes, wyf,' quod he, 'I holde it best.'

'Kys me,' quod she, 'we be no lenger wrothe,  
1240 For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe –  
This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.

I prey to God that I moote sterven wood,  
But I to yow be also good and trewe  
As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe.

1245 And but I be to-morn as fair to seene

As any lady, emperice, or queene,  
That is bitwixe the est and eke the west,  
Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest.  
Cast up the curtyng, looke how that it is.'

1250 And whan the knyght saugh verrailly al this,

That she so fair was, and so yong therto,  
For joye he hente hire in his armes two.  
His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.

1255 A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,  
And she obeyed hym in every thyng  
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende  
In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende  
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,

1260 And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!

*Heere endeth the Wyves Tale of Bathe*

I place myself under your wise authority; you yourself choose  
which would give the greatest pleasure and the greatest honour  
to both you and me – I don't mind which of the alternatives –  
because what pleases you is enough for me.'

'So have I gained supremacy over you,' she said, 'because I  
can make choices, and control as it pleases me?'

'Yes, indeed, wife,' he said, 'I consider that to be best.'

'Kiss me,' she said, 'we're not angry with one another any  
more, because, on my honour, I shall be both things to you –  
that is to say, both beautiful and good. I pray God that I may  
die insane, if I'm not as good and faithful to you as ever any  
wife has been since the world began. And if tomorrow morning  
I'm not as beautiful to behold as any lady, empress or queen,  
from east to west, do as you wish whether to let me live or die.  
Lift up the curtain and see how I look.'

And when the knight saw all this, that she was indeed so  
beautiful, and moreover so young, he hugged her for joy. His  
heart was bathed in happiness, he gave her a thousand kisses  
one after another And she obeyed him in every way that might  
give him pleasure or delight.

Thus they lived in perfect bliss till the end of their lives. May  
Jesus Christ send us husbands who are obedient, young and  
lively in bed, and [may he grant us] the favour to outlive them  
when we've married. And I also pray to Jesus to shorten the  
lives of those who refuse to be ruled by their wives. And may  
God send the plague itself on those that are old, peevish and  
mean with money!

*Here ends the Wife of Bath's Tale*