

“The Miller’s Prologue”

Translation by A. S. Kline<sup>1</sup>

*Here follow the words between the Host and the Miller.*

When that the Knight had thus his tale told,  
In all our company was nor young nor old  
Who did not claim it as a noble story  
And worthy to be stored in memory,  
Especially the well-born, every one.

Our Host laughed, and swore: ‘We go on,  
All goes aright; we’ve unbound the bale!  
Let’s see now who shall tell another tale,  
For truly the game is well begun.

(10) Now you tell, Sir Monk, if you can,  
Something to repay the Knight’s tale.’

The Miller, that for drunkenness was pale,  
So that with effort on his horse he sat,  
He would neither doff his hood or hat,  
Nor wait for any man, in courtesy,  
But in Pilate’s voice began, noisily  
To swear: ‘By arms, and by blood and bones,  
I know a noble tale I’ll tell at once,  
With which I shall requite the Knight’s tale!’

(20) Our Host saw that he was drunk with ale,  
And said; ‘Wait now, Robin, dear brother;  
Some fitter man shall tell us first another.  
Wait now, and let us work it all seemly.’

‘By God’s soul,’ quoth the Miller, ‘not for me!  
For I will speak or else go on my way.’

Our Host answered: ‘Tell on, as you may!  
You are a fool; your wits are overcome.’

‘Now hearken,’ quoth the Miller, ‘all and some!  
But first I’ll make a protestation

(30) That I am drunk – I know it by my tongue.

And therefore, if that I misspeak or say,  
Blame then the ale of Southwark, I pray.  
For I will tell a legend from the life,  
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,  
How that at her a clerk set his cap.’

The Reeve answered, saying: ‘Hold your trap!  
Have done with lewd drunken harlotry!

It is a sin and also greater folly  
To slander any man, or him defame,  
(40) And give wives too an evil name.  
There is plenty else at which to aim.’

The drunken Miller spoke up again,

And replied: ‘My dear brother Oswald,  
He who has no wife, he is no cuckold;  
But I say not that therefore you are one.  
There be good wives and many a one,  
And ever a thousand good for every bad;  
You know it yourself unless you’re mad.  
Why are you angry with my tale now?’

(50) I have a wife, indeed, as well as thou,  
Yet not for the oxen in my plough,  
Would I take it upon me for an hour  
To believe it of myself that I was one.  
I will believe indeed that I am none.  
A husband should not be too inquisitive  
Of God’s affairs, or how his wife live.  
If he shares God’s abundance entire,  
Of the rest he need not then enquire.’

What more can I say, the Miller there  
(60) His words for no man would forbear,  
But told his churl’s tale in his own manner.  
And I regret I must repeat it here;  
And therefore every gentle soul I pray  
Deem it not, for God’s sake, that I say  
Ought by evil intent, but must rehearse  
All their tales, for better or for worse,  
Or else be somewhat false to the matter.  
Therefore whoever thinks it idle chatter  
Turn to another page, and choose a tale,  
(70) For you shall find enough, never fail,  
Great and small, stories of genteelness,  
And morality as well, and holiness.  
Blame not me, if you choose amiss.  
The Miller is a churl; you all know this.  
So was the Reeve also, and others too,  
And harlotry they told of, both the two.  
Take thought, and hold me free of blame –  
Man should not treat in earnest what’s a game.

“The Miller’s Tale”

*Here begins the Miller’s Tale.*

Once upon a time there dwelt in Oxford  
(80) A rich churl, that took in guests to board,  
And for his craft he was a carpenter.  
With him there was dwelling a poor scholar  
Who had learned the arts, but all his fancy  
Was set on studying astrology,  
And he could judge certain propositions  
By the course of his investigations,

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[<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/English/Ca nthome.htm>]. 30 July (2015).

Should men ask of him at certain hours  
If there would be drought or else showers,  
Or if they should ask what might befall  
(90) Of sundry things – I could not tell them all.

This clerk was called courtly Nicholas.  
Skilled in secret love affairs, and solace,  
And withal was clever and discreet,  
And to see was like a maiden meek.  
A chamber had he in that hostelry,  
Alone, without any company,  
Elegantly garnished with herbs sweet;  
And he himself as sweet as root may be  
Of liquorice, or any zedoary.

(100) His Almagest, and his library,  
His astrolabe, belonging to his art,  
His counters for arithmetic, laid apart  
On shelves that stood at his bed's head;  
His cupboard covered with a cloth of red.  
And above all a showy psaltery  
On which at night he made melody  
So sweetly that all the chamber rang;  
And Angelus ad virginem he sang,  
And after that he sang The King's Note.  
(110) Full often blessed, was his merry throat.  
And thus this sweet clerk his time spent,  
With what his friends provided, and the rent.

This carpenter had wedded a new wife,  
Whom he loved far more than his life.  
Of eighteen years she was of age.  
Jealous he was, and kept her in a cage,  
For she was young and wild, and he was old,  
And thought himself a likely cuckold.  
He knew not Cato – his learning was crude –  
(120) Who advised a man to wed his similitude.

Men should wed according to their state,  
For youth and age, at odds, end in debate.  
But since he had fallen in the snare,  
He must endure, as we, the weight of care.  
Fair was this young wife, and then withal  
Like a weasel's her body, shapely, small.  
A belt she wore, one all barred with silk;  
An apron too, as white as morning milk,  
Upon her hips, full of many a gusset.

(130) White was her smock, embroidery set  
Before, behind, on the collar all about,  
Of coal-black silk, within and without.  
The tapes of her white cap all together  
Were of the same cloth as her collar;  
Her broad headband of silk, and set full high.  
And she had surely a flirtatious eye.  
Plucked very fine were her eyebrows two,

And arched and black as any sloe too.  
She was much more beautiful to see  
(140) That is the early blossoming pear-tree,  
And softer than the wool on a wether;  
And by her girdle hung a purse of leather,  
Tasselled with green and pearled with brass,  
In al this world, in seeking of a lass,  
There's no man with fancy so intense  
Could dream of such a poppet, such a wench.  
Full brighter was the shining of her hue  
Than in the Mint a noble forged anew.  
And for her singing, lively, voiced afar,  
(150) Like any swallow flitting through a barn.  
Then she could skip and gambol, as I am  
Assured, as any kid or calf behind its dam.  
Her mouth was sweet as honeyed mead I'd say,  
Or a hoard of apples swathed in heath or hay.  
Skittish she was, as is a frisky colt,  
Tall as a mast, and straight as a bolt.  
A brooch she wore upon her low collar,  
As broad as is the boss of a buckler.  
Her shoes were laced on her legs high.  
(160) She was a primrose, lovely to the eye,  
For any lord to take into his bed,  
Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

Now sirs, now, so things came to pass,  
That one day this handsome Nicholas  
Began with this young wife to fool and play,  
While her husband was down Osney way –  
As clerks are full of subtlety and tricks.  
And covertly he caught her by the sex,  
And said: 'Sweetheart, unless I have my will  
(170) For secret love of you, then die I will!'  
And held her hard by the haunch bones,  
And: 'Sweetheart, love me, now,' he moans,  
'Or I will die, as God shall me save!'  
And she leapt as a colt does, in the way  
Of being shod, and turned her head away.  
She said: 'I will not kiss you, by my faith!  
Why, let be' quoth she, 'let be, Nicholas!  
Or I will cry "Now, help" and shout "Alas!"  
Remove your hands, by every courtesy!'  
(180) Then Nicholas began to cry for mercy,  
And spoke so fair, so earnestly did cast,  
That she was hooked, and pledged her love at last,  
And swore an oath, by Thomas, Saint of Kent,  
That she would be at his commandment,  
When she could find an opportunity.  
'My husband is so filled with jealousy  
That unless you're patient, secretive,  
Quoth she, 'I know for sure I shall not live.

You must be wholly secret in this house.'  
(190) 'Nay, give that not a thought,' quoth  
Nicholas,  
'A scholar would have wasted a good while  
If he could not a carpenter beguile.'  
And so they were agreed and both swore  
To wait awhile, as I have said before.  
When Nicholas had done so, as I tell,  
And patted her about the buttocks well,  
He kissed her sweet, and took his psaltery  
And played away, and plucked a melody.  
Then it befell, that to the parish church,  
(200) There to perform Christ's own works,  
This good wife went, on a holy day.  
Her forehead shone as bright as any day,  
So shiny was it when she left her work.  
Now there was a parish clerk of that church,  
And this clerk's name was Absolon.  
Curly was his hair, and as the gold it shone,  
And stuck out in a fan wide and broad.  
Full straight and even his parting showed;  
His face was red, his eyes grey as a goose.  
(210) With St Paul's tracery carved in his shoes,  
In red hose he dressed elegantly.  
He was clothed neatly and properly  
Adorned with a light-blue cloth jacket,  
Full fair and densely were the laces set.  
And over it he wore a fine surplice  
As white as the blossom on the spray is.  
A merry youth he was, so God me save!  
Well knew he how to let blood, clip and shave,  
And draw up deeds of land or quittance.  
(220) In twenty manners he could trip and dance,  
After the true school of Oxford though,  
And with his legs leaping to and fro,  
And playing songs on a two-stringed fiddle;  
Thereto he sometimes sang a high treble,  
And he could play as well on a cithern.  
In all the town no brew-house nor tavern  
He did not visit with his power to solace,  
Where any gaily-dressed barmaid was.  
But truth to tell, quite squeamish he was  
(230) About farting, and in speech fastidious.  
Absolon, who was gallant in his way,  
Would bear the censer round on holy days,  
Censing the parish wives whom he passed;  
And many a fond look on them he cast,  
And especially on the carpenter's wife.  
To look at her brightened up his life,  
She was so trim and sweet and amorous.  
I dare well say, if she had been a mouse,

And he a cat, she'd have been leapt upon.  
(240) This parish clerk, this gallant Absolon,  
Has in his heart such a love-longing  
That from no wife would he take offerings;  
For courtesy, he said, he would take none.  
The moon, when it was night, full bright shone,  
And Absalon his cithern did take;  
For love indeed he thought to wake.  
And off he went, lively and amorous,  
Till he came to the carpenter's house,  
Arriving there a little after cock-crow,  
(250) And placed himself by a casement window,  
That was let into the carpenter's wall.  
He sings in a voice, graceful and small:  
'Now dear lady, if your wish it be,  
I pray you to have mercy upon me',  
In harmony with his music-making.  
The carpenter awoke and heard him singing,  
And spoke to his wife and said anon,  
'What Alison, do you hear Absalon,  
Singing thus under our bedroom wall?'  
(260) And she answering her husband's call:  
'Yes, God knows John, I hear it very well.'  
And so it goes; what more must I tell?  
From day to day this lively Absalon  
So woos her that he is woebegone.  
He lay awake all night, and then daily  
He combed his curling locks and gaily,  
He wooed by go-betweens, and brokerage,  
And swore he would be her own true page;  
He sang and warbled like a nightingale;  
(270) He sent her mead, sweet wine, and spiced  
ale,  
And flat cakes, piping hot from the oven,  
And as she lived in town, coins to spend.  
For some folk are conquered by riches,  
And some by blows, and some by kindness.  
Sometimes, to show skill and agility,  
He played Herod in the Mysteries.  
But what good did it do him, alas?  
She so loves the handsome Nicholas  
That Absalon might go blow his horn;  
(280) For all his labour there was only scorn.  
And thus she made Absalon her dupe,  
And of all his eager wooing a joke.  
True indeed the proverb, and no lie,  
That men repeat: 'Ever the sly, nearby,  
Makes the distant lover out of favour.'  
Though Absalon knew madness or anger,  
Because he was further from her sight,  
Nicholas nearby stood in his light.

Now do well, you handsome Nicholas!  
 (290) For Absalon must wail and sing 'alas!'  
 And so it befell, on a Saturday  
 The carpenter had gone down to Osney;  
 And handsome Nicholas and Alison  
 Both agreed regarding this decision,  
 That Nicholas shall devise some wile  
 This jealous foolish husband to beguile.  
 And if the game turned out alright,  
 She would sleep in his arms all night;  
 For this was her desire and his too.  
 (300) And straight away, without more ado,  
 This Nicholas wishing not to tarry,  
 But quietly to his room does carry  
 Both meat and drink, to last a day  
 Or two, and told Alison to say,  
 If her husband asked for Nicholas,  
 That she had no idea where he was;  
 That all the day of him she'd had no sight;  
 She thought he might be ill, so he might,  
 For he had not answered the maid's call;  
 (310) Gave no reply, whatever might befall.  
 This continued all that Saturday,  
 And Nicholas still in his chamber lay,  
 And eat and slept, as pleased him best,  
 Till Sunday, when the sun went to its rest.  
 The foolish carpenter wondered without fail  
 About our Nicholas, why he should ail,  
 And said: 'I fear by Saint Thomas,  
 That all is not well with Nicholas.  
 God forbid that he die suddenly!  
 (320) This world is now so fickle indeed;  
 I saw a corpse today borne to church  
 That only Monday last I saw at work.  
 'Go up,' quoth he to his lad anon,  
 'Call at the door, or tap it with a spoon.  
 See how things are, and tell me swiftly.'  
 The serving-boy climbed up sturdily,  
 And at the chamber door a while the lad,  
 Called and knocked, as though he were mad.  
 'What how! What do you, Master Nicholay?  
 (330) How can you lie asleep the livelong day?'  
 – But all for naught; he heard not a word.  
 A hole he found, down by the skirting-board,  
 Through which the cat was wont to creep,  
 And into that hole he gazed full deep,  
 And at last a glimpse met his sight  
 Of Nicholas lying gaping there upright,  
 As if he had caught sight of the new moon.  
 Down he goes, to tell his master, soon  
 Of the state in which he found the man.

(340) The carpenter to bless himself began,  
 And said: 'Help us, Saint Frideswide!  
 A man little knows what shall betide.  
 This man has fallen, through astronomy,  
 Into some madness, or some agony.  
 I always thought that's how it would be;  
 Men should know what God meant us to see.  
 Yes, blessed always is the simple man,  
 With nothing but his faith to understand!  
 So fared another clerk's astronomy;  
 (350) He walked, in the fields, into the starry  
 Sky to pry, and see what should befall,  
 Till into the marl-pit he took a fall;  
 He saw not that! But yet, by Saint Thomas,  
 I'm truly worried for poor Nicholas.  
 He shall be scolded for his studying,  
 If scold I may, by Jesus, Heaven's king!  
 Get me a stave to work against the floor,  
 While you, Robin, heave at the door.  
 He'll wake from his studying, I guess.'  
 (360) And to the chamber door he gave address.  
 His lad was a fellow big and strong,  
 And heaved it off its hinges at once;  
 Onto the floor the door fell anon.  
 Nicholas sat there yet, still as stone,  
 And kept on gaping up into the air.  
 The carpenter thought him in despair,  
 And grasped him by the shoulders mightily  
 And shook him hard, and shouted loudly.  
 'What, Nicholas, what ho! What, look down!  
 (370) Awake, and think you of Christ's passion!  
 I guard you with the cross from elf and sprite.'  
 – With that the night-spell he said outright  
 On all the four sides of the house about,  
 And on the threshold of the door without.  
 'Jesus Christ, and Saint Benedict,  
 Guard this house from all things wicked,  
 All night through, white Pater noster!  
 Where went thou, Saint Peter's sister?'  
 And at last our handsome Nicholas  
 (380) Began to sigh deeply, and said: 'Alas!  
 Shall the world be lost and doomed now?  
 The carpenter replied: 'What say thou?  
 What, think on God, as we do, working men!'  
 And Nicholas answered: 'Fetch me drink then,  
 And afterwards I'll speak, in privacy,  
 Of certain things regarding you and me;  
 I will tell them to no other man, that's certain.'  
 The carpenter went down, and back again  
 Brought of powerful ale a large quart.  
 (390) And when each of them had drunk his part,

Nicholas went swift to his door and shut it,  
 And made the carpenter beside him sit,  
 And said: 'John, my good host and dear,  
 You shall upon your oath swear me here  
 That to no man this secret you'll betray;  
 For it is Christ's counsel that I say,  
 And if you tell it man, you are no more,  
 For this vengeance fall on you therefore,  
 You will be mad, let that be understood'  
 (400) 'Nay, Christ forbid it, for his holy blood!'  
 Quoth then this foolish man: 'I'll not blab,  
 No, though it's I who say it, I never gab.  
 Say what you will: I shall never tell  
 Child nor wife, by him that harrowed Hell!'  
 'Now John,' quoth Nicholas, 'No lies from me;  
 I have found through my astrology,  
 As I gazed into the moon so bright,  
 That Monday next, a fourth part of the night,  
 A rain shall fall, as wild, as mad, as could  
 (410) That half so great was never Noah's flood.  
 This world,' said he, 'in less than an hour  
 Shall all be drowned, so hideous the shower.  
 Thus shall all mortals drown and lose their life'  
 The carpenter replied: 'Alas, my wife!  
 And shall she drown? Alas, my Alison!'  
 For sorrow of this he almost fell, anon  
 He said: 'Is there no remedy in this pass?'  
 'Why yes, by God!' quoth handsome Nicholas.  
 – If you will act on wise advice indeed.  
 (420) You mustn't follow where your own  
 thoughts lead;  
 For thus says Solomon, who speaks the truth:  
 'Act on advice, and you shall nothing rue.'  
 And if you will act on good counsel,  
 I undertake, without a mast or sail,  
 That I shall save her, and you, and me, for  
 Have you not heard how saved was Noah,  
 When that our Lord had warned him before  
 That all the world with water should be o'er?  
 'Yes,' quoth the carpenter, 'long long ago.'  
 (430) 'Have you not heard,' quoth Nicholas, 'also  
 The sorrow of Noah, with his fellowship,  
 Before he could get his wife to ship?  
 He'd have preferred, I dare well say, alack,  
 At that time, rather than his wethers black  
 That she had had a ship to herself alone!  
 And therefore know you what must be done?  
 This demands haste, and of a hasty thing  
 Men may not preach or ask for tarrying;  
 Anon and quickly get, and bring us in  
 (440) A kneading trough, or that for brewing,

One for each of us – but see they're large –  
 In which we can sail as in a barge,  
 And have in there victuals sufficient  
 For a day – and never mind the remnant!  
 The water shall abate and drain away  
 About nine in the morning, the next day.  
 But Robin, must not know of this, your knave,  
 Nor your maid Jill, her too I cannot save.  
 Ask not why, for though you ask of me,  
 (450) I will not tell God's secret as must be.  
 Let that suffice, and unless you're mad  
 Accept as great a grace as Noah had.  
 Your wife I shall save without a doubt.  
 Go now your ways, and speed hereabout.  
 And when you have for her, and you and me,  
 Brought in these kneading-tubs, all three,  
 Then shall you hang them in the attic high,  
 That no man may our preparations spy.  
 And when you thus have done as I have said,  
 (460) And have placed in them our meat and bread,  
 And an axe to smite the rope in two also,  
 When the water comes, we may go  
 And break a hole up high, in the gable,  
 On the garden side above the stable,  
 So we can pass freely on our way,  
 When the great shower has gone away.  
 Then shall you swim as merry, I undertake,  
 As does the white duck following her drake.  
 Then will I call: 'Now, Alison, Now John!  
 (470) Be merry for the flood will soon be gone!'  
 And you will say: 'Hail, Master Nicholay!  
 Good morrow, I see you well, for it is day.'  
 And then shall we be lords all our life  
 Of all the world, as Noah and his wife.  
 But of one thing I warn you of right:  
 Be well advised, on that same night  
 That we take ship, and go on board,  
 None of must speak or say a word,  
 Nor call out, nor cry, but fall to prayer,  
 (480) For it is God's own command clear.  
 Your wife and you must far apart begin,  
 So that betwixt you there shall be no sin,  
 No more in looking than there is in deed.  
 This decree is made; go, and God speed!  
 Tomorrow at night when folk are all asleep,  
 Into our kneading-tubs shall we creep,  
 And there we'll sit, abiding God's grace.  
 Go now your way; I have no more space  
 To make of this a longer sermoning.  
 (490) Men say thus: 'Send the wise, say nothing.'  
 You are so wise I have no need to preach.

Go, save our lives, and do as I beseech!  
 This foolish carpenter goes on his way;  
 Full often says: 'Alas!' and Well-away!  
 And to his wife he told it secretly;  
 And she already knew as well as he  
 What this ingenious plan might signify.  
 But nonetheless she made as if to die,  
 And said: 'Alas, be on your way anon!  
 (500) Help us escape, or we be dead each one!  
 I am your true and very wedded wife;  
 Go dear spouse, and help to save my life.'  
 Lo, what a great thing is emotion!  
 Men may die of imagination,  
 So deep the impression it may make.  
 This foolish carpenter began to quake;  
 He truly thought that he could see  
 Noah's flood come surging like the sea  
 To drown Alison, his honey dear.  
 (510) He weeps and wails, with sorry fear;  
 He sighs with sorrowful groan enough;  
 He goes to fetch a kneading-trough,  
 And after a tub, and one for brewing;  
 And secretly he carried them in,  
 And hung them from the roof in secrecy.  
 With his own hands he made ladders three  
 To climb up by the rungs and so after  
 Reach the tubs hanging in the rafters,  
 And victualled them both trough and tub,  
 (520) With bread and cheese, and good ale in a jug,  
 Sufficient right enough to last a day.  
 But ere he had made all this array,  
 He sent his lad and the wench also  
 On business to London for to go.  
 And on the Monday, as it drew to night,  
 He shut his door, without a candle bright,  
 And readied everything as it should be;  
 And shortly up they climbed all three.  
 They sat still, some little time it was.  
 (530) 'Pater noster, and be mum!' said Nicholas,  
 And 'mum' said John, and 'mum' quoth Alison.  
 The carpenter completed his devotion,  
 And sat quite still, and said his prayer,  
 Awaiting rain, and tried if he could hear.  
 A dead sleep, from all this business,  
 Fell now on the carpenter (as I guess)  
 About curfew time, or a little more.  
 With troubling of his spirit he groaned sore,  
 And often snored, his head awry was.  
 (540) Down the ladder steals our Nicholas,  
 And Alison, full softly down she sped.  
 Without more words they slip into the bed

Where the carpenter was wont to be;  
 There was the revel and the melody.  
 And thus lie Alison and Nicholas  
 At the affair of mirth and solace,  
 Till the bell for lauds began to ring,  
 And the friars in the chancel to sing.  
 The parish clerk, the amorous Absolon,  
 (550) Who for love was always woebegone,  
 Upon the Monday was down at Osney  
 To disport and play, in company,  
 And chanced to ask a fellow cloisterer,  
 Privately, of John the carpenter.  
 The fellow drew him outside the church,  
 And said: 'I know not; he's not been at work  
 Since Saturday. I think that he went  
 For timber, where our Abbot had him sent;  
 For he for timber frequently will go  
 (560) And stay at the grange a day or so –  
 Or else he at his house, I would maintain.  
 Where exactly, I could not be sure again.'  
 Now Absalon full jolly was and light  
 Of heart and thought: 'I'll wake tonight,  
 For certainly I've not seen him stirring  
 About his door since day began to spring.  
 So might I thrive, I shall at cock's crow  
 Knock all secretly at his window,  
 That's placed low upon his chamber wall.  
 (570) And Alison now I will tell of all  
 My love-longing, and will scarcely miss  
 At least from her the favour of a kiss.  
 Some sort of comfort I'll have, by faith.  
 My mouth has itched all this long day;  
 That is a sign of kissing at the least.  
 All night I dreamed that I was at a feast.  
 Therefore I'll go and sleep an hour say,  
 And then all night will I wake and play.'  
 When the first cock had crowed, anon  
 (580) Up rose this jolly lover, Absalon,  
 And gaily dressed to perfection is,  
 But first chews cardamom and liquorice,  
 To smell sweet, before he combs his hair.  
 Under his tongue true-love (Herb Paris) there,  
 And in that way to be gracious he set out.  
 He wanders off to the carpenter's house,  
 And stood there still under the casement window –  
 Until it touched his breast it was so low –  
 And soft he coughed with a gentle sound:  
 (590) 'What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?  
 My fair bride, my sweet cinnamon!  
 Awake, my lover, speak to me, come!  
 So little you think upon my woe,

That for love I faint wherever I go.  
 No wonder is it that I faint and sweat;  
 I pine just as a lamb does for the teat,  
 Surely, darling, I have such love-longing  
 That like a turtle-dove is my pining;  
 I scarcely eat as little as does a maid.'  
 (600) 'Away from the window, Jack fool,' she  
 said.  
 'So help me God, there's no "come up and kiss  
 me"!  
 I love another – and unless I mistake me –  
 A better than you, by Jesus, Absalon.  
 Go on your way, or I will hurl a stone,  
 And let me sleep, in the devil's name, away!  
 'Alas,' quoth Absalon, 'and well-away,  
 That true love was ever so ill bestowed!  
 Then kiss me, if that's the most you owe,  
 For Jesus love, and for the love of me.'  
 (610) 'Will you go your way with it?' quoth she.  
 'Yes, darling, certainly,' quoth Absalon.  
 'Then be ready,' quoth she, 'I come anon.'  
 And to Nicholas she said: Be still!  
 Now hush, and you can laugh your fill!  
 Then Absalon went down on his knees,  
 And said: 'I am a lord in every degree,  
 For after this I hope for more hereafter.  
 Lover your grace, and sweet bride your favour!'  
 The window she undoes and that in haste.  
 (620) 'Now do,' quoth she, 'come on, no time to  
 waste,  
 Lest that our neighbours should you espy.'  
 Then Absalon first wiped his mouth full dry.  
 Dark was the night like to pitch or coal,  
 And at the window out she put her hole,  
 And Absalon, had better nor worse than this,  
 That with his mouth her naked arse he kissed  
 Before he was aware, had savoured it.  
 Back he started, something was amiss,  
 For well he knew a woman has no beard.  
 (630) He felt something rough, and long-haired,  
 And said: 'Fie, alas, what have I done?'  
 'Tee-hee!' quoth she, and clapped the window  
 shut,  
 And Absolon goes off with saddened pace.  
 'A beard, a beard!' quoth spritely Nicholas,  
 'By God's body, that went fair and well!'  
 Now Absolon heard every word himself,  
 And began his lip in anger to bite,  
 And to himself he said: 'I'll you requite!  
 Who rubs himself, who scrubs at his mouth,  
 (640) With dust, sand, chippings, straw and cloth

But Absolon, who often cries: 'Alas!  
 My soul consign to Satan, if I'd have  
 This town before my vengeance,' quoth he,  
 'For this humiliation well repaid I'll be.  
 Alas,' quoth he, 'that I never blenched!  
 His hot love was cold and all quenched,  
 For from the time that her arse he kissed  
 Love he valued less than a stalk of cress,  
 For he was healed of his malady.  
 (650) And love he did defy eternally.  
 And weeping like a child they look to beat,  
 At gentle pace he slowly crossed the street,  
 To a smith, and he called Gervase is,  
 Who forges on his anvil harnesses;  
 He sharpens shares and coulter busily.  
 Absalon knocked on the doors all easily,  
 And said: Open, Gervase, and quick anon!  
 'What, who is that? 'It's me, Absalon.'  
 'What, Absalon! Christ's blessed tree, I say,  
 (660) Why up so early? Benedicite,  
 What ails you? Some fine girl, at a glance,  
 Has brought you out on reconnaissance;  
 By St Neot, you know well what I mean!  
 But Absalon, he gave never a bean  
 For all the jesting; silently did stand.  
 He had a deal more business on hand  
 Than Gervase knew, and said: 'Friend, so dear,  
 That hot coulter in the chimney there,  
 Please lend it me; I've something needs doing,  
 (670) And full soon to you again it I'll bring.'  
 Gervase answered: 'Even if it were gold,  
 Or a bag full of nobles, all untold,  
 You should have it, as I'm a true smith!  
 Now, Christ's foe, what would you do with it?'  
 'Let that,' quoth Absalon, 'be it as it may;  
 I'll tell you of it all another day' –  
 And caught the coulter by the cold steel.  
 Softly out the door he began to steal,  
 And then went off to the carpenter's wall.  
 (680) First he coughed then he knocked withal  
 On the window, as loud as he dared  
 Then Alison answered: 'Who's there,  
 That knocks so? I warrant it's a thief!'  
 'Why no' quoth he, 'Not so, by my faith;  
 I am your Absalon, my sweet darling.  
 'Of gold, quoth he, 'I've brought you a ring.  
 My mother gave it me, so God me save.  
 Full fine it is, and carefully engraved;  
 This will I give you, if you will me kiss.'  
 (690) Now Nicholas had risen for a piss,  
 And thought he would improve the jape:

He should kiss his arse ere he escape.  
And he raised the window hastily,  
And put his arse outside covertly,  
Beyond the buttock, to the haunch-bone.  
And then spoke up the clerk, Absalon:  
'Speak, sweet bird; I know not where you art.'  
Then Nicholas at once let fly a fart,  
As great as if it were a thunder-clap,  
(700) The clerk was nearly blinded with the blast;  
Yet he was ready with his iron hot,  
And Nicholas right in the arse he smote.  
Off went the skin a hand's breadth round and  
some;  
The coulter had so burnt him on his bum,  
That for the pain he thought he would die.  
As if he were mad, he began to cry:  
'Help! Water, water, help, for God's heart!'  
The carpenter out of his slumber starts,  
Hears him cry: 'Water' loud as ever he could,  
(710) And thought: 'Alas, now here comes Noah's  
flood!'  
Up he sat at once, no more ado,  
And with his axe he smote the cord in two,  
And down he went – He had no time to sell  
His bread or ale at all, but straight he fell  
On to the floor, and there a-swooning was.  
Up start our Alison and Nicholas,  
And cry 'Help!' and 'Succour!' in the street.  
The neighbours, the lesser and the great,  
Came running in to gaze at this man,  
(720) Who swooning lay, both pale and wan,  
For in the fall he broken had his arm.  
But he had still to suffer all the harm,  
For when he spoke, he was borne down,  
By handsome Nicholas and Alison.  
They told everyone that he was mad;  
Afraid so, in a fantasy he had  
Of Noah's flood, that in his deep folly  
He had bought him kneading-tubs three,  
And had hung them from the roof above,  
(730) And had begged them, for God's love,  
To sit there in the roof for company.  
The folk begin to mock his fantasy;  
Up into the roof they gaze and stare;  
And turn all his hurt to jest right there.  
For whatsoever the carpenter averred  
It was for naught; no man his story heard.  
And with great oaths he was so put down  
He was considered mad throughout the town,  
For the clerks all said to one another.  
(740) 'The man is mad, for sure, my dear brother!'

And everybody laughed at all this strife.  
And thus was had the carpenter's wife,  
For all his jealousy and keeping by;  
And Absalon has kissed his nether-eye,  
And Nicholas is scalded on the bum.  
God save us all, and now this tale is done!