

“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”

Translation by A. S. Kline¹

Experience, though no authority
Ruled in this world, would be enough for me
To speak of the woe that is in marriage.
For, lordings, since I twelve years was of age,
Thanks be to God who eternally does thrive,
Husbands at church-door have I had five –
If it be allowed so oft to wedded be –
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But I was told, for sure, and not long since,
(10) That since Christ never went but once
To a wedding, in Cana of Galilee,
That by the same example He taught me
That I should only be wedded once.
Hark too, lo, what sharp words for the nonce
Beside a well, Jesus, God and Man,
Spoke in reproof of the Samaritan:
‘You have had five husbands,’ quoth he,
‘And that same man that now has thee
Is not your husband’ – so he said for certain.
(20) What he meant by that, I can’t explain;
But I ask you why the fifth man
Was not husband of the Samaritan?
How many was she allowed in marriage?
I have never yet had despite my age
Of that number any definition.
Men may divine and gloss, up and down,
But well I know, indeed, without a lie,
God bade us all to wax and multiply.
That gentle text I well can understand!
(30) And I know too He said that my husband
Should leave father and mother and cleave to me;
But of no number mention made He,
Of bigamy or of octogamy.
Why should men then speak of it evilly?
Lo, here, the wise King, old Solomon,
I think he had more wives than one!
As would to God it were permitted me
To be refreshed half so oft as he!
A gift of God had he of all those wives!
(40) No man has such that’s in this world alive.
God knows, that noble king, as I see it,
The first night had many a merry fit
With each of them, so happy was his life!
Blessed be God, that I have wedded five,
And they I picked out from all the best,

Both for their nether purse and their chest.
Diverse schools make perfect clerks,
And diverse practice in many sundry works,
Makes the workman perfect, certainly.
(50) Of five husbands have I made a study;
Welcome the sixth, whenever he befall!
Forsooth, I will not keep me chaste in all;
When my husband from this world is gone,
Some Christian man shall wed me anon.
For then the Apostle says that I am free
To wed, in God’s name, where it pleases me.
He says to be wedded is no sin, I learn:
‘Better to be wedded than to burn.’
What care I if folk speak maliciously
(60) Of wicked Lamech and his bigamy?
I know that Abraham was a holy man,
And Jacob also, as far as ever I can,
And each of them had more wives than two,
And many another holy man had too.
Where can you show me, in any age
That God on high forbade our marriage
By express word? I pray you, tell it me.
Or where commanded he virginity?
I know as well as you, what he said,
(70) The Apostle, when he spoke of maidenhead,
He said that precepts for it he had none.
Men may counsel a woman to live alone,
But counselling is no commandment;
He has left it to our own judgement.
For had God commanded maidenhood,
Then had he ended marriage and for good.
And surely, if there were never seed sown,
Virginity, where would that be grown?
Paul did not dare command, not in the least,
(80) A thing of which his Master never preached.
The spear, the prize, is there of virginity;
Catch it who may, and who runs best let’s see!
But this word is not said of every wight,
Rather God’s pleased to grant it of his might.
I know well that the Apostle was a maid,
But nonetheless, though he wrote and said
He wished that everyone was such as He,
He was but counselling virginity,
And to be wife he still gave me leave
(90) Of indulgence; so no reproof indeed,
If my husband die, in wedding me,
No objection on grounds of bigamy,
Though it were good no woman for to touch –

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

He meant in bed or on a couch or such –
For peril it is, fire and tow to assemble –
You know what this image does resemble!
The long and short: he held virginity
More perfect than marriage in frailty.
Frailty I say, unless the he and she
(100) Would live all their life in chastity.
I grant it well, I would have no envy,
Though maidenhood devalue bigamy.
They like to be clean in body and ghost.
And of my state I will make no boast;
For you well know, a lord in his household
Has not ever vessel made all of gold.
Some are of wood, and do good service.
God calls folk in sundry ways like this,
And everyone has from God his own gift,
(110) Some this, some that, as is in His wish.

Virginity is a great perfection
And continence also with devotion.
But Christ, of perfection is the well,
And bade not everyone to go and sell
All that he had, and give it to the poor,
And in that guise follow him, for sure.
He spoke to those who would live perfectly;
And, lordings, by your leave, that is not me!
I will bestow the flower of my age
(120) On the actions and the fruits of marriage.

Tell me then, to what end and conclusion
Were made the members of generation,
And in so perfect wise Man was wrought?
Trust me right well, they were not made for
naught.
Gloss as you will and give the explanation
That they were made merely for purgation
Of urine, and both our things, so the tale,
Made but to know the female from the male,
And for no other purpose – say you no?
(130) Experience knows well it is not so.
So long as the clerics with me be not wrath,
I say this: that they are made for both –
That is to say, for office and for ease
Of procreation, that we not God displease.
Why else is it in the books clearly set
That a man shall pay his wife her debt?
Now wherewith should he make his payment,
If he did not use his blessed instrument?
Thus were they added to the creature
(140) To purge urine, and continue nature.

But I do not say every wight is told
That has such tackle, as I unfold,
To go and use it to engender there –

Or men for chastity would have no care.
Christ was a maid, yet formed as a man,
And many a saint since the world began,
Yet lived they ever in perfect chastity.
I have no quarrel with virginity;
Of pure wheat-seed let them be bred,
(150) And let us wives be dubbed barley-bread –
And yet with barley-bread, as Mark can
Remind you, Jesus fed full many a man.
In such a state as God has called us,
I will persevere; I am not precious.
In wifeness will I use my instrument
As freely as my Maker has it sent.
If I be niggardly, God give me sorrow!
My husband shall have it eve and morrow,
When he would come forth and pay his debt.
(160) A husband I will have, I will as yet,
Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall,
And bear the tribulation withal
On his own flesh, while I am his wife.
I have the power during my whole life
Over his proper body, and not he.
Right thus the Apostle told it me,
And bade our husbands for to love us well;
On that saying I ever like to dwell.'

Up started the Pardoner, and that anon:
(170) 'Now dame,' quoth he, 'by God and by Saint
John,
You are a noble preacher in this cause!
I was about to wed a wife: I pause!
What! Should I pay, with my own flesh, so dear?
I'd rather wed no wife, then, any year!'
'Abide,' quoth she, 'my tale's not yet begun.
Nay, you will drink from a different tun,
Before I go, and savour worse than ale.
And when I have told you all my tale
Of tribulation in marriage,
(180) In which I am an expert at my age –
That is to say, I have been the whip –
Then please yourself whether you wish to sip
Of this tun that I shall broach.
Beware of it, before a close approach!
For I shall give examples more than ten.
'Whoever will not be warned by other men,
To other men shall an example be.'
These very words writes Ptolemy;
Read in his *Almagest*, and find them there.'
(190) 'Dame, I would pray you, if it is your
care,'
Said this Pardoner, 'as you began,
Tell forth your tale; spare not any man,

And teach us young men of your practices.'

'Gladly,' quoth she, 'if you it pleases.
But yet I ask of all this company,
If I should chance to speak out of whimsy,
Take no offence then at what I say,
For my intention is but to play.

Now sir, then will I tell you all my tale.
(200) If ever I might drink of wine or ale,
I shall speak true: those husbands that I had
Three of them were good, and two were bad.
The three good men were rich and old.
With difficulty only could they hold
To the articles that bound them to me –
You know well what I mean by that, I see!
So help me God, I laugh when I think
That sad to say they never slept a wink.
And, by my faith, I set by it no store.

(210) They gave me land and treasure more;
I had no need to show them diligence
To win their love, or do them reverence.
They loved me so well, by God above
I had no need to set store by their love.
A wise woman will busy herself anon
To win her love, yes, if she has none.
But since I held them wholly in my hand,
And since they had given me all their land,
Why should I be concerned to please,
(220) Except for my own profit and my ease?
I set them so to work, by my faith,
That many a night they sang "well-away!"
But never for us the flitch of bacon though,
That some may win in Essex at Dunmow.
I ruled them so according to my law,
That each of them was blissful and in awe,
And brought me pretty things from the fair.
They were full glad when I spoke them fair,
For God knows, I chid them mercilessly.

(230) Now hearken how to act properly.
You wise wives that will understand,
Put them ever in the wrong, out of hand,
For half so boldly there never was a man
Could swear oaths and lie as woman can.
I say this not for wives who are wise,
Unless it be when they are mis-advised.
A wise wife, if she knows good from bad,
Will call the chattering magpies merely mad,
And obtain the witness of her own maid
(240) To what she asserts – listen how I played:

"Old sir dotard is this then your way?
Why is my neighbour's wife dressed so gay?
She is honoured now wherever she goes;

I sit at home; and lacking decent clothes.
What are you doing at my neighbour's house?
Is she so fair? Are you so amorous?
What do you whisper to the maid, benedicitee?
Old sir lecher, away with your trickery!
And if I have a gossip with a friend,
(250) All innocently, you chide like the fiend
If I walk or wander to his house.
Yet you come home drunk as a mouse,
And preach from your chair, beyond belief!
You tell me, then, how it's a great mischief
To wed a poor woman, the expense,
And then if she's rich, of good descent,
Then you say it's a torment, and misery
To endure her pride and melancholy.
And if she be fair, you proper knave,
(260) You say that every lecher has his way
With her, since none in chastity abide,
When they are assailed from every side.

You say, that some desire us for our riches,
Some for our shapeliness, some for our fairness,
And some because we can sing or dance,
And some for gentleness and dalliance,
Some for our hands and arms so small –
By your word, thus to the devil go us all!
You say men never hold a castle wall,
(270) If it is long laid siege to, it will fall.
And if she be foul, you say that she
Covets every man that she might see,
For like a spaniel she will at him leap
Till she finds some man to take her cheap;
Never a goose so grey swam on the lake
That, say you, it will not find a mate.
You say it's a hard thing to control
What no man willingly will hold.
Thus say you, lord, on your way to bed,
(280) And that no wise man ever needs to wed,
Nor no man that has his eye on Heaven –
Wild thunderbolts and lightning-fire then
Fall on your withered neck till it be broke!

You say that leaking roofs, and thick smoke,
And chiding wives can make men flee
From their own house – ah, benedicitee,
What ails the old man so to make him chide?

You say we wives will all our vices hide
Till we be wed, and then we show them you.
(290) That may well be the saying of a shrew!

You say that oxen, asses, horse and hound,
Can be tried over every sort of ground,
Basins, bowls, before a man may buy;
Spoons, stools, and all such things we try,

And likewise pots, clothes, and finery,
 But wives must remain a mystery
 Till they be wedded, you old dotard shrew!
 And then, we will our vices show, says you.

You say too that it displeases me
 (300) Unless you forever praise my beauty,
 And every moment pore o'er my face,
 And call me "fair dame" in every place,
 And lay out for a feast upon the day
 When I was born, and make me fresh and gay,
 And do my old nurse every honour,
 And my chambermaid in my bower,
 And my father's kin and his allies;
 So say you, old barrel-full of lies!

And yet because of our apprentice, Jankin,
 (310) And his crisp hair, that shines as gold so fine,
 And his squiring me both up and down,
 You harbour false suspicion, as I found;
 I would not want him if you died tomorrow!

But tell me this, why do you hide, a sorrow,
 The keys of your chest away from me?
 They are my goods as well as yours, pardee!
 What, will you make an idiot of your dame?
 Now, by that lord who is called Saint James,
 You shall not both, whatever be your moods,
 (320) Be master of my body, and my goods.
 One you shall forgo, so say I,
 What need have you to enquire or spy?
 I think you'd like to lock me in your chest!
 You should say: "Wife, go where you wish.
 Take your pleasure; I'll believe no malice.
 I know you for a true wife, Dame Alice."
 We love no man that keeps watch, takes charge
 Of where we go; we wish to be at large.

Of all men the most blessed must be,
 (330) That wise astrologer, old Ptolemy,
 That writ this proverb in his Almagest:
 "Of all men his wisdom is the highest
 That cares not who has this world in his hand."
 By this proverb you must understand,
 If you've enough, why should you care
 How merrily other folks do fare?
 Be sure, old dotard, by your leave
 You shall have all you wish at eve.
 He is too great a niggard who will spurn
 (340) A man who wants a light from his lantern;
 He will have no less light, pardee!
 If you've enough, don't complain to me.

You say too, if we make ourselves gay
 With clothing, and with precious array,
 It puts us in peril of our chastity.

And yet – curse it – you make free
 With these words in the Apostle's name:
 "In clothing made of chastity and shame
 You women shall adorn yourselves," quoth he,
 (340) "And not with braided hair, or jewellery,
 With pearls, or with gold, or clothes rich."
 According to your text, as your tricks,
 I'll not act, not as much as a gnat!

You said then, that I was like a cat,
 For whosoever sings a cat's skin
 Then will the cat keep to his inn;
 While if the cat's skin be sleek and gay,
 She'll not dwell in that house half a day.
 But out she'll pad, ere any daylight fall,
 (350) To show her skin, and go and caterwaul.
 That is to say, if I feel gay, sir shrew,
 I'll run and show my old clothes to the view.

Sir, old fool, what use to you are spies?
 Though you beg Argus with his hundred eyes
 To be my body-guard, since he best is,
 In faith, he shall not if it's not my wish.
 Yet I will trim his beard, as I may thee!

Then you said that there are things three,
 The which things trouble all this earth,
 (360) And that no man may endure the fourth –
 Away, sir shrew, Jesus trim your life!
 You preach again and say a hateful wife
 Is reckoned to be one of these mischances.
 Are there then no other circumstances
 You could address your parables to,
 Without a poor wife acting one for you?

You even liken woman's love to Hell,
 To barren land, where water may not dwell.
 You liken it then, as well, to a wild fire:
 (370) The more it burns, the more it has desire
 To consume everything that burnt can be.
 You say, that just as insects kill a tree,
 Just so a wife destroys her husband;
 This they know who to a wife are bound."

Lordings, like this it was, you understand,
 I kept my older husbands well in hand
 With what they said in their drunkenness;
 And all was false, but I had witnesses
 In Jankin, and in my niece also.
 (380) O Lord, the pain I did them and the woe,
 Full innocent, by God's sweet destiny!
 For like a horse I could bite and whinny.
 I could moan, when I was the guilty one
 Or else I'd oftentimes been done and gone.
 Who at the mill is first, first grinds their grain;
 So was our strife ended: I did first complain.

They were right glad and quick to apologise
For things they never did in all their lives.

For wenching I would take the man in hand,
(390) Though him so sick he could hardly stand.
Yet it tickled his heart, in that he
Thought I was fond of him as he of me.
I swore that all my walking out at night
Was just to spy on the wenches that I cite;
Flying that flag caused me many a mirth.
For all such wit is given us at birth;
Deceit, weeping, spinning, God gives
To woman by nature, while she lives.
And of one thing I can boast, you see:
(400) I had the better of them in high degree,
By cunning, force, or some manner of thing,
Such as continual murmuring and grumbling.
And in bed especially they had mischance:
There was my chiding and remonstrance.
I would no longer in the bed abide,
If I felt his arm across my side,
Till he had paid his ransom to me;
Then would I let him do his nicety.
And therefore every man this tale I tell,
(410) Win whosoever may, for all's to sell!
With empty hand you will no falcon lure.
In winning would I all his lust endure,
And display a feigned appetite –
And yet in bacon I took no delight.
That was the cause ever I would them chide;
For though the Pope had sat down beside,
I would not spare them at their own board,
For, by my troth, I paid them word for word.
As may aid me God the Omnipotent,
(420) Though I this minute make my testament,
I owe them not a word that was not quits!
I brought it about so by my wits
That they were forced to yield, for the best,
Or else we would never have found rest.
For though he might rage like a maddened lion,
Yet he would always fail in his conclusion.

Then would I say: "My dear, note how meek
The look that Willikin displays, our sheep!
Come here, my spouse, let me kiss your cheek.
(430) You should be as patient, and as meek,
And have as sweet and mild a conscience,
Since you preach so much of Job's patience.
Practice endurance ever that you preach;
And if you don't then certainly I'll teach
How fair it is to have a wife at peace.
One of us two must yield, at least,
And since a man is more reasonable

Than a woman, you should be tractable.
What ails you, to grumble so and groan?
(440) Is it you would possess my sex alone?
Why, take it all; lo, have it every bit!
Saint Peter damn you if you don't enjoy it!
For if I were to sell my belle chose,
I could go as fresh as is the rose;
But I will keep it for your own use.
By God, you are to blame, and that's the truth."

Such manner of words have we on hand.
Now will I speak of my fourth husband.
My fourth husband was a reveller;
(450) That is to say, he kept a lover.
And I was young, and my spirits high,
Stubborn and strong, and pert as a magpie.
How I danced to the harp, without fail,
And sang, indeed, like any nightingale,
When I had drunk a draught of sweet wine.
Metellius, the foul churl, the swine,
That with a stick robbed his wife of life
For drinking wine, though I had been his wife
Would never have frightened me from drink!
(460) And after wine on Venus I would think,
For as surely as cold engenders hail,
A gluttonous mouth gets a lecherous tail.
A drunken woman has no true defence;
This lechers know from their experience.

But, Lord Christ, whenever in memory
I recall my youth and all my jollity,
It tickles me about my heart's root.
To this day it does my heart good,
That I have had the world, in my time.
(470) But age, alas, that poisons every clime,
Bereft me of beauty, vigour with it.
Let go, farewell; and the devil take it!
The flour is gone, what more is there to tell.
The bran, as best I can, now I must sell.
But yet to be right merry, I have planned!
Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.

I say, I felt at heart a deal of spite
If he in any other took delight;
But he was paid, by God and Saint Judoc!
(480) I made him of the same wood a crook –
Not of my body, in some foul manner,
But was such friends with folk, by and by,
That in his own grease I made him fry,
For anger, and for very jealousy.
By God, on earth I was his purgatory!
For which I hope his soul is in glory.
For, God knows, he sat full oft in song,
When his shoe pinched him all along.

There is none but God and he who knew
 (490) In how many ways I tortured him anew.
 He died when I returned from Jerusalem,
 And lies there buried under the rood-beam,
 Albeit his tomb's not so curious
 As was the sepulchre of Darius,
 That Apelles sculpted subtly;
 It were a waste to bury him preciously.
 May he fare well, God give his soul rest!
 He is now in his grave and in his chest.
 Now of my fifth husband will I tell.
 (500) God may his soul never come to Hell!
 And yet to me he was the worst, I know –
 I feel it on my ribs all in a row,
 And ever shall, until my dying day.
 But in our bed he was so fresh, I say,
 And could cajole me so, God knows,
 When that he would have my belle chose,
 That though he'd beaten me on every bone,
 He could still win my love to him anon.
 I swear I loved him best, because he
 (510) Was in his love niggardly to me.
 We women have, you'll hear no lie from me,
 In this affair a strange fantasy:
 Whatever we may not easily get,
 We cry all day and crave for it.
 Forbid us aught, desire it then will we;
 Press on us hard, and we will flee.
 Reluctantly we show our goods at fairs;
 Great crowds at market make for dear wares,
 And what is cheap is held a worthless prize.
 (520) This knows every woman who is wise.
 My fifth husband – God his soul bless! –
 Whom I took for love, not for riches,
 He sometime was a clerk of Oxford town,
 And left the college, and seeking found
 Lodgings with my friend, there made one –
 God keep her soul! Her name was Alison.
 She knew my heart, and my secrets she,
 Better than our parish priest, trust me.
 To her I revealed my secrets all;
 (530) For had my husband pissed against a wall,
 Or done some crime that would cost his life,
 To her, and to another worthy wife,
 And to my niece, that I loved as well,
 I would have told the secret, just to tell.
 And so I did full often, God knows
 It made his face full often like a rose,
 Red hot for very shame, and sorry he
 For telling me his secret privately.

And so befell it that one day in Lent –

(540) For often to my friend's house I went,
 As ever yet I loved to laugh and play,
 And to walk in March, April, and May,
 To hear sundry tales among the alleys –
 Jankin clerk, and I, and my friend Alice,
 Into the fields about the city went.
 My husband was in London all that Lent;
 I had the greater leisure for to play,
 And to see, and be seen, every day
 By lusty folk. How did I know what grace
 (550) Might be my destiny, and in what place?
 Therefore I made my visitations
 Went to vigils, and also to processions,
 To preaching too, and these pilgrimages,
 To the miracle plays, and marriages,
 And wore my gay scarlet as I might.
 The worms, and the moths, and mites
 Upon my soul, gnawed it never a bit;
 And why? Well, I was never out of it.

I'll tell you now what happened to me:
 (560) I say that in the fields around walked we,
 Till truly we made such a dalliance,
 This clerk and I, that at a chance
 I spoke to him, and said to him that he,
 If I became a widow, should marry me.
 For certainly, with no false modesty,
 I was never without a little surety
 Of marriage, nor ever had far to seek.
 I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek,
 That only has one little hole to bolt to,
 (570) And if that fail, then everything is through.

I maintained he had enchanted me;
 My mother taught me that subtlety.
 And I said too, I dreamed of him all night;
 He seemed to slay me as I lay upright,
 And all my bed indeed was full of blood –
 “But yet I hope that you will do me good,
 For blood betokens gold as I was taught.”
 And all was false; I never dreamed of aught,
 But by way of following mother's lore,
 (580) In things like that as well as others more.

But now, sir – let me see – what's to explain?
 Aha! By God, I have my tale again!

When my fourth husband was on his bier,
 I wept for hours, and sorry did appear –
 As wives must, since it's common usage,
 And with my kerchief covered up my visage.
 But since I was provided with a mate,
 I only wept a little, I should state.
 To church was my husband borne that morrow,
 (590) With neighbours that wept for him in sorrow,

And Jankin, our clerk, was one of those.
 So help me God, when I saw him go
 After the bier, I thought he had a pair
 Of legs and of feet so fine and fair,
 That all my heart I gave to him to hold.
 He was, I swear, but twenty winters old,
 And I was forty, to tell the truth,
 But yet I always had a coltish tooth.
 Gap-toothed I was, and that became me well;
 (600) I'd the print of Venus' seal, truth to tell.
 So help me God, I was a lusty one,
 And fair, and rich, high-spirited and young!
 And truly, as my husbands told me,
 I had the finest quoniam that might be.
 For certain, I am all Venereal
 In feeling, and my heart is Martial.
 Venus gave me my lust, lasciviousness,
 And Mars gave me rebellious boldness.
 My ascendant Taurus, with Mars therein –
 (610) Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
 I always followed my inclination,
 By virtue of my constellation.
 It made me so I could never withhold
 My chamber of Venus from a fellow bold.
 Yet have I Mars' mark upon my face,
 And also in another private place.
 For, God wisely be my salvation,
 I never loved with any discretion,
 But ever followed my appetite,
 (620) Whether he was long, or short, or black or
 white.
 I cared not, so long as he liked me,
 How rich he was, nor of what degree.
 What can I say, but at the month's end,
 This jolly clerk Jankin, my godsend,
 Wedded me with great solemnity,
 And him I gave the land and property
 All that had been given to me before.
 But after I repented of it full sore;
 He would allow me nothing I held dear.
 (630) By God, he smote me once on the ear,
 Because I tore a page from his book,
 So that my ear was deaf from the stroke.
 Stubborn I was, as is a lioness,
 And with a tongue nagging to excess,
 And walk I would, as I had done before,
 From house to house, something he deplored.
 About which he often times would preach,
 And of the old Roman tales he'd teach –
 How Simplicius Gallus left his wife,
 (640) And forsook her for the rest of his life,

Because he saw her hatless in the way,
 As he looked out his door one fine day.
 Another Roman, he told me his names,
 Because his wife went to the summer Games
 Without him knowing, he forsook her too.
 And then would he to his Bible go anew
 And seek that proverb of the Ecclesiast,
 Where he commands and forbids, aghast:
 "Man shall not suffer his wife to gad about."
 (650) Then would he speak like this, without
 doubt:
 "Whoever builds his house of willows,
 And spurs his blind horse o'er the fallows,
 And sees his wife a pilgrim to All Hallows,
 Is worthy to be hanged on the gallows!"
 But all for naught – I cared never a haw
 For his proverbs, and his old saw,
 Nor would I by him corrected be.
 I hate him who my vice tells to me;
 And so do more, God knows, of us than I!
 (660) He was enraged with me, fit to die;
 I could not stand him in any case, alas.
 Now will I tell you true, by Saint Thomas,
 Why I tore that page out of his book,
 From which my ear was deafened by his stroke.
 He had a book that gladly night and day,
 For his pleasure he would read always.
 He called it Theophrastus and Valerius –
 At which he used to laugh fit to bust.
 And then there was some clerk at Rome,
 (670) A Cardinal, named Saint Jerome,
 Who made a book against Jovinian;
 In which book bound up was Tertullian,
 With Chrysippus, Trotula, Heloise,
 That was abbess not far from Paris,
 And the parables of Solomon,
 Ovid's Art of Love, and many a one.
 And all of these bound in the one volume,
 And every night and day it was his custom,
 When he had leisure and vacation
 (680) From other worldly occupation,
 To read in this book of wicked wives.
 He knew of them more legends and lives
 Than there are of good wives in the Bible.
 For trust me well, it is impossible
 For any clerk to speak well of wives
 Unless it is of holy saints' lives,
 Never of any other woman though.
 Who wrote the histories, tell me who?
 By God, if women had written the stories
 (690) As clerics have within their oratories,

They'd have written of men more wickedness
 Than all the sons of Adam could redress!
 The children of Venus and Mercury
 In all their workings are contrary:
 Mercury loves wisdom and science,
 And Venus loves spending, revelry, and dance.
 And because of their diverse disposition,
 Each is in fall in the other's exaltation;
 So, God knows, Mercury is helpless,
 (700) In Pisces where exalted is Venus,
 And Venus falls when Mercury is raised.
 Therefore no woman is by cleric praised.
 The clerk, when he is old, and cannot do
 Of Venus' works the worth of his old shoe,
 Then sits he down and writes in his dotage
 That women cannot be true in marriage!

But now to my purpose, as I told you,
 How I was beaten for a book, all true.
 One night Jankin, that was our sire,
 (710) Read his book, as he sat by the fire,
 Of Eve first, that through her wickedness
 Brought all mankind to wretchedness,
 For which indeed was Jesus Christ slain,
 Who purchased us with his heart's-blood again.
 Lo here, expressed of women may you find,
 That woman was the bane of all mankind!

Then he read to me how Samson lost his hair:
 Sleeping, his lover cut it with her shears,
 Through which treason he lost both his eyes.
 (720) Then he read me, for I'll tell no lies,
 Of Hercules, Deianira, and the pyre
 Where, through her, he set himself on fire.

Nor did he miss the sorrow and woe too
 That Socrates had with his wives two –
 How Xantippe poured piss over his head.
 The foolish man sat still, as he were dead.
 He wiped his head; no more dare say again,
 But: "Ere the thunder stops, comes the rain."
 – Of Pasiphae, that was the Queen of Crete;
 (730) Out of maliciousness he thought that sweet –
 Fie, speak no more, it is a grisly thing,
 Of her fierce lust, and perverse liking!
 – Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery
 That made her husband die by treachery;
 He read all that with great devotion.

He told me also on what occasion
 Amphiarus at Thebes lost his life;
 My husband had the legend of his wife,
 Eriphyle, who for a necklace of gold
 (740) Secretly to all the Greeks had told
 Of her husband's private hiding-place,

For which at Thebes he did misfortune taste.

Of Livia he told me, and Lucilia:
 They both killed their husbands there,
 The one for love, the other out of hate.
 Livia her husband one evening late
 Empoisoned, because she was his foe.
 Lucilia, lascivious, loved hers so
 That, to make him always of her think,
 (750) She gave him such a manner of love-drink
 That he was dead ere it was the morrow –
 And thus in every way husbands have sorrow.

Then he told me how one Latumius
 Complained to his comrade Arrius,
 That in his garden there grew a tree
 On which he said that his wives three
 Hanged themselves, for spite it was.
 "Oh dear brother," quoth this Arrius,
 "Give me a cutting from that blessed tree,
 (760) And in my garden planted it shall be!"

Of wives of later date he also read,
 How some had slain their husbands in their bed,
 And let their lovers pleasure them all night,
 While the corpse lay on the floor upright;
 And some had driven nails through their brain,
 While they were sleeping, and thus them slain.
 Some had given them poison in their drink.
 He spoke more harm than heart could think,
 And with all that he knew more proverbs
 (770) Than in this world grow grass or herbs.
 "Better," quoth he, "that your habitation
 Be with a lion or a foul dragon,
 Than with a woman who will always chide.
 Better," quoth he, "high on the roof to abide,
 Than with an angry wife down in the house;
 They are so wicked and cantankerous
 They hate what their husbands love," he'd say,
 "A woman always casts her shame away
 When she casts off her smock," and lo,
 (780) "A fair woman unless she's chaste also,
 Is like a gold ring in a sow's nose."
 Who would think, or who could suppose
 The woe, that in my heart was, and pain?

And when I say he did begin again
 Reading of that cursed book all night,
 All suddenly three leaves then did I
 Pluck from his book, as he read and, weak
 As I am, my fist so took him on the cheek
 That in our fireplace he fell backward down.
 (790) And started up as does a raging lion,
 And with his fist he struck me on the head,
 That on the floor I lay as I were dead.

And when he saw how still that I lay,
 He was aghast, and would have fled away,
 Till at last I came to and raised my head.
 "Oh, have you slain me, false thief," I said,
 "And for my land thus have you murdered me?
 Ere I be dead, yet will I kiss thee!"

And near he came and knelt right down,
 (800) And said: "Dear sister, my Alison,
 So help me God, I shall thee never smite.
 That I have done so was your fault outright;
 Forgive me yet, and that I do beseech."
 And once again I hit him on the cheek,
 And said: "Thief, my vengeance thus I wreak!
 Now will I die; I may no longer speak."
 But in the end, with care and much ado,
 We came to an agreement did we two.
 He gave the bridle all into my hand,
 (810) To me the governance of house and land,
 And of his tongue and of his hand also,
 And I made him burn his book of woe.
 And when that I had gotten unto me
 By mastery all the sovereignty,
 And that he said: "Mine own true wife,
 Do as you wish through all your term of life;
 Guard your honour, and my good estate,"
 After that day we had no more debate.
 God help me so, I was as kind to him
 (820) As any wife from Denmark unto Inde,
 And also true, and so was he to me.
 I pray to God that sits in majesty,
 To bless his soul, of His mercy dear!
 Now will I say my tale, if you will hear.'

*Behold the words between the Summoner and
 Friar*

The Friar laughed when he had heard all this;
 'Now dame,' quoth he, 'so send me joy and bliss,
 This is a long preamble to a tale!
 And when the Summoner heard the Friar rail,
 'Lo,' quoth the Summoner, 'God's arms two,
 (830) A Friar will interfere whatever you do!
 Lo, good men, a fly and then a friar
 Will fall in every dish and every fire!
 What do you mean by your 'preambulation'?
 Come, amble, or trot, or sit, or stay in motion!
 You're hindering our sport in this manner.'
 'You think so, Sir Summoner,' quoth the Friar.
 'Now, by my faith, I shall, before I go
 Tell of a summoner a tale or so,

That all the folk shall laugh in this place.'
 (840) 'Now if not, Friar, I will curse your face,'
 Quoth the Summoner, 'and then curse me,
 If I do not tell a tale or two or three,
 Of Friars, ere I come to Sittingborne,
 That will make your very heart go mourn,
 For well I know your patience is all gone.'

Our Host cried: 'Peace, and that anon!'
 And said: 'Let the woman tell her tale.
 You bicker like folk full drunk on ale.
 Come, dame, tell forth your tale, that will be best.'
 (850) 'All ready, sir,' quoth she, 'just as you
 wish,
 If I have licence of this worthy Friar.'
 'Yes, dame,' quoth he, 'tell forth and I will
 hear.'

*Here ends the Wife of Bath's Prologue and her
 Tale begins*

In the olden days of King Arthur,
 Of whom Britons speak with great honour,
 All this land was filled full with faerie.
 The Elf-Queen with her fair company
 Danced full oft in many a green mead.
 That was the old opinion, as I read –
 I speak of many hundred years ago.
 (860) But now no man sees elves I know,
 For now the endless charity and prayers
 Of limiters and other holy friars,
 Who search every field and every stream
 As thick as are the motes in a sun-beam,
 Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, bowers,
 Cities, boroughs, castles and high towers,
 Thorps, barns, cattle-sheds, and dairies –
 This is why there are no longer faeries.
 For wherever there used to walk an elf,
 (870) There walks now the limiter himself
 In the noon-time and in the mornings,
 And says his matins and his holy things
 As he goes round his limitation's bounds.
 Women may go safely up and down;
 In every bush or under every tree,
 There is no incubus about but he,
 And he will only do them dishonour.

And it so befell that this King Arthur
 Had in his house a lusty bachelor
 (880) Who one day came riding from the river,
 And it chanced that, alone as he was born,
 He saw a maiden walking there at dawn,
 Of which maid, no matter how she pled,

By very force he stole her maidenhead;
Which oppression raised so great a clamour
And such petitions to King Arthur
That this knight was condemned as dead
By court of law and set to lose his head –
Peradventure, such was the statute though –
(890) But that the Queen and other ladies so
Prayed the King for so long for his grace
That he his life granted him in its place,
And gave him to the Queen, to do her will,
To choose whether she would save or kill.

The Queen thanked the King with all her might;
And after thus she spoke to the knight,
When she thought it right, upon a day,
'You yet stand,' quoth she, 'in such array
That of your life you yet shall have no surety.
(900) I grant you life though, if you can tell me
What thing it is that women most desire.
Beware and keep your neck from axe's ire!
And if you cannot tell me now anon,
Yet I will give you leave to be gone
A twelve-month and a day, and everywhere
Seek answer sufficient to this matter there.
And surety will I have, before you ride a pace,
That you return in person to this place.'

Woe was this knight, and sorrowfully mired,
(910) But then, he might not do as he desired.
And at the last he chose to go and wend,
And come again, right at the year's end,
With such answer as God would him purvey;
And so took leave and wended on his way.

He sought at every house in every place
Wherever he had hopes of finding grace,
To learn what thing women love the most;
But could not find by inland field or coast
Any one solution to this matter
(920) On which two creatures agreed together.
Some said women had most love of riches;
Some said honour, some said happiness;
Some rich array, some said lust abed,
And oft times to be widowed and to wed.
Some said that our heart is most eased
When we are flattered most and pleased.
(I cannot lie! He's very near reality;
A man may win us best by flattery;
And with attention, all the business,
(930) Are we best snared, the great and less.)

And some said that we love best
To be free, and do as we're possessed,
And that no man reprove us of our vice,
But claim we are not fools but somewhat wise.

For truly there is none at all among us,
If anyone on some sore spot will rub us
That will not kick if he tells the truth.
Try, and you will find it so, in sooth.
For, be we ever so vicious within,
(940) We would be held as wise and free of sin.

And some said that great delight have we
In being thought dependable, discreet,
Steadfastly maintaining our purpose well,
And not betraying things that some might tell –
But value that at less than a rake-handle!
Woman's discretion isn't worth a candle;
Witness old Midas – will you hear the tale?

Ovid, amongst his great and small ale,
Says Midas had, under his long hair,
(950) Upon his head two ass's ears there;
The which deformity he hid from sight
Of every man, as subtly as he might,
That save his wife, none knew it was so.
He loved her best, and trusted her also;
He begged her that to no creature
She would tell of this sad feature.

She swore 'no', for all the world to win,
She would not do such villainy and sin,
As to gain her husband so foul a name;
(960) She would not tell she said out of shame.
But nevertheless she almost died
At having this secret so long to hide.
She felt it swell so sore about her heart
That some word was sure from her to start.
And since she dared tell it to no man,
Down the marsh close nearby she ran –
Till she reached it her heart was all afire –
And as a bittern booms in the mire,
She laid her mouth to the water down.
(970) 'Betray me not, water, with your sound!'
Quoth she, 'I tell it now, but just to you:
My husband has long ass's ears two!
Now is my heart all whole; now is it out.
I could no longer hide it, have no doubt.'
Here you see, that we can for a time abide,
Yet out it must; we can no secret hide.
The remainder of the tale, if you would hear,
Read Ovid, and you will find it there.

The knight of whom my tale tells specially,
(980) When he saw he could not find out easily –
That is to say, what women love the most –
Within his breast full sorrowful was his ghost.
But home he goes; he could not make sojourn;
The day was come when homeward he must turn.
And on his way back he happened to ride,

Full of his cares, under a forest side,
 Where he saw dancing on woodland floor
 Of ladies four and twenty, and yet more.
 Towards the which dance he began to turn,
 (990) In hope that some wisdom he might learn.
 But certainly, before he was fully there,
 Vanished was the dance; he knew not where.
 No creature saw he that showed sign of life,
 Save, sitting on the green, an old wife –
 A fouler one than her might none devise.
 Against the knight this wife began to rise
 And said: 'Sir knight, here there lies no way.
 Tell me what you are seeking, by your faith!
 Peradventure it might be better thus for thee;
 (1000) This old woman knows many things,' quoth she.

'My dear mother,' quoth the knight, 'for certain
 I am a dead man, unless I can show plain
 What thing it is that women most desire.
 Should you enlighten me, I'd pay your hire.'

'Plight me your troth, here by my hand,' quoth she,

'That the next thing I require of thee
 You shall do, if it lies within your might,
 And I will tell you of it ere it be night.'

'Here, by my truth!' quoth the knight, 'Agreed.'
 (1010) 'Then,' quoth she, 'I dare boast readily
 Your life is safe, for I will stand thereby.
 Upon my life, the Queen will speak as I.
 Let's see if then the proudest of them all
 That wears a head-cloth or a gemmed caul
 Dare say nay to that which I shall teach.
 Let us go on without longer speech.'

Then she whispered something in his ear,
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.

When they had reached the court, this knight
 (1020) Declared he had kept his promise, to the night,

And ready was his answer, as he said.
 Full many a noble wife and many a maid
 And many a widow – since they are wise –
 And the Queen herself, sitting in justice high,
 Were assembled his answer there to hear;
 And in a while the knight was bade appear.

Of everyone demanded was their silence,
 And that the knight should tell his audience
 What thing that worldly women love the best.
 (1030) The knight forbore to stand there like a
 beast,

But to her question swiftly answered her
 In manly voice, so all the court could hear.

'My liege lady, generally,' quoth he,
 Women desire the self-same sovereignty
 Over a husband as they do a lover,
 And to hold mastery, he not above her.
 That is your great desire, though you me kill;
 Do as you wish; I am at your will.'
 In all the court there was nor wife nor maid
 (1040) Nor widow who could challenge what he
 said,

But said that he was worthy to have his life.

And at that word up started the old wife
 Whom the knight had found sitting on the green.
 'Mercy,' quoth she, 'my sovereign lady queen;
 Ere that your court depart, see me aright.

I taught this answer to this same knight,
 For which he plight me his troth entire,
 That the first thing I should of him require
 He would do, if it lay within his might.

(1050) Before the court then, pray I you, sir
 knight,'

Quoth she, 'that you take me as your wife,
 For you know well that I have saved your life.
 If I say false, say so, upon your faith.'

The knight answered, 'Alas and well-away!
 I know right well that such was my behest.
 For God's love, now choose a fresh request!
 Take all my goods, and let my body go.'

'Nay, then,' quoth she, 'A curse upon us two!
 For though that I be foul and old and poor,
 (1060) I wish not, for all the metal and the ore
 That is buried under earth or lies above,
 For aught but to be your wife, and your love.'

'My love!' quoth he, 'nay, my damnation!
 Alas, that any of my nation
 Should ever be disgraced so foully!
 But all for naught; the end is this, that he
 Had little choice; he needs must her wed,
 And take his old wife, and go to bed.

Now some men would say, peradventure,
 (1070) That in my negligence I make no feature
 Of all the joy there was and the array
 That at the feast appeared that very day.

To which thing briefly I answer shall:
 I say, there was no joy or feast at all;
 There was only heaviness and much sorrow.
 For secretly he wedded her that morrow,
 And all day after hid him like an owl;
 Such woe was on him – with a wife so foul.

Great was the woe the knight had in his thought
 (1080) When he was with his wife to bed there
 brought;

He thrashed about and twisted to and fro.
His old wife lay smiling broadly though,
And said: 'O dear husband, benedicitee!
Does every knight do with his wife as thee?
Is this the law about King Arthur's house?
Is every knight of his so mean a louse?
I am your own love, and then your wife;
I am she who has saved your life,
And, for sure, I have served you right.
(1090) Why do you thus with me this first night?
You act as would a man who'd lost his wit!
What is my sin? For God's love, tell me it,
And it shall be amended, if I may.'

'Amended,' quoth the knight, 'Alas, nay, nay!
It cannot be amended evermore.
You are so ugly, and so old, and more
You come also of such a lowly kin,
That little wonder is I thrash and spin.
God, would the heart but burst in my breast!'
(1100) 'Is this,' quoth she, 'the cause of your
unrest?'

Yes,' quoth he, 'what wonder all's amiss?'
'Now, sire,' quoth she, 'I could amend all this,
If I wished, before we have seen days three,
If you would but bear yourself well towards me.

If you all think by speaking of nobleness
Such as has descended from old riches,
That therefore it makes you noble men,
Such arrogance is not worth a hen.
Look for the most virtuous man always,
(1110) In private and public, who sees his way
To doing the noblest deeds that he can,
There will you find the greatest gentleman.
Christ wills we take from him our gentleness,
Not from our ancestors, despite their riches.
For though they leave us all their heritage,
From which we claim noble parentage,
Yet can they still bequeath us nothing
Not one of us, of their virtuous living,
That made them gentlemen in name to be,
(1120) Who bade us follow them in that degree.

Well has the wise poet of Florence,
Dante, I mean, spoken in this same sense –
Lo, in such verse Dante's tale advances:
"Seldom arises by his slender branches
Man's prowess, for God, of his goodness,
Wills that of him we claim our gentleness."
For from our elders we can nothing claim
But temporal things, which may hurt and maim.

And everyone knows this as well as me:
(1130) If nobility were implanted naturally

In a certain lineage down the line,
Publicly, privately then the vine
Of noble work would be evergreen;
They would enact no vice or villainy.

Take fire, and bear it to the darkest house
Between here and the distant Caucasus,
And let men shut the doors and return,
Yet will the fire remain there and burn
As if twenty thousand did it behold.
(1140) Its natural office it will ever hold,
On peril of my life, until it die.

Thus you may see how the noble eye
Is not wedded to possession,
Since folk do not maintain its function
Forever, as does fire, lo, of its kind.
For, God knows, men will often find
A lord's son acting shameful villainy.
And he who wants to claim nobility
Because he was born of a noble house,
(1150) His ancestors noble and virtuous,
And yet himself has done no noble deeds,
Nor followed his noble ancestors deceased,
He is not noble, be he duke or earl,
For base sinful deeds make the churl.
While mere renown makes gentility,
Your ancestors and their great bounty,
Which is external and not your own;
Your nobility comes from God alone.
Thus comes our own nobility by grace;
(1160) Not bequeathed to us by rank and place.

Think how noble, as says Valerius,
Was that Tullius Hostilius,
Who rose from poverty to high status,
Read Seneca and read Boethius,
There is it both expressed and agreed
That he is noble who does noble deeds.
And therefore, dear husband, I conclude
Although my ancestry is rough and rude,
Yet may God on high, I hope, may He
(1170) Grant me the grace to live virtuously.
Thus am I noble, when I first begin
To live in virtue, and abandon sin.

And in that you my poverty reprove,
The God whom we believe in and love,
In wilful poverty chose to live his life.
And surely, every man, maid or wife
Understands that Jesus, Heaven's King,
Could yield of his life no vicious thing.
Honest poverty is fine, that's certain:
(1180) This, Seneca and other clerks maintain.
The man content with poverty, I assert

That man is rich, although he lacks a shirt.
He that covets wealth is all the poorer
For he would have what is not in his power.
But he who has naught, yet does not crave,
Is rich, although you hold him but a knave.

True poverty sings, in reality.
Juvenal says of poverty appositely:
"The poor man, as he goes on his way
(1190) Beside the thief, may ever sing and play."
Poverty though hateful's good nonetheless
In that it is a great release from business;
A great augments too of sapience,
To the man accepting it with patience.
Poverty, though it seems second best,
Is a possession no man can contest.
Poverty, often, when a man is humble
Leads him to God, and to himself as well.
Poverty is a glass, it seems to me,
(1200) Through which he may his true friends see.
And thus, sire, since I wish no grief to you,
Of my poverty show no more reproof.

Now, sire, of being old you reprove me;
And certainly, though no authority
Were found in books, yet men of honour
Say that you should show an old man favour,
And call him father, out of courteousness;
And authors too say so, as I would guess.
Now then you say that I am foul and old,
(1210) Well then you need not fear to be cuckold.
For poverty and old age, you must agree,
Are great guardians of chastity.

Yet nonetheless, since I know your delight,
I shall fulfil your worldly appetite.
Choose now,' quoth she, 'which of these to try:
To see me old and ugly till I die,
And be to you a true and humble wife,
Who never will displease you all my life,
Or else you may have me young and fair,
(1220) And take the risk that all those who repair
To our house are there because of me,
And to other places, it well may be.
Now choose, yourself, just as you like.'

The knight thought deeply and with a sigh
At last he replied to her in this manner:
'My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
I place myself in your wise governance.
Choose yourself which is the most pleasant,
And brings most honour to me and you.
(1230) I do not care which it is of the two,
For as you like it, that suffices me.'

'Then have I won the mastery,' quoth she,

'Since I may choose and govern as I wish?'
'Yes, surely, wife,' quoth he, 'I hold that best.'

'Kiss me,' quoth she, 'and no more wrath.
For, by my troth, I to you will be both –
That is to say, both fair and good.
I pray to God I shall die mad, and would,
If I be not to you both good and true
(1240) As ever wife was, since the world was new.
And if I be not tomorrow as fair to see
As any lady, Empress or Queen may be,
Who lives between the east and the west,
Do what you wish touching my life and death.
Lift the curtain; see what already is.'

And when the knight swiftly saw all this,
That she was young, and lovely too,
For joy he took her in his arms two.
His heart was bathed in a bath of bliss;
(1250) A thousand times in a row they kiss,
And she obeyed him in everything
That pleased him and was to his liking.

And thus they lived to their lives end
In perfect joy – and Jesus Christ us send
Husbands meek, young, and fresh abed,
And grace to outlive those that we wed.
And also I pray Jesus, trim the lives
Of those who won't be governed by their wives,
Those old and angry, grudging all expense,
(1260) God send them soon indeed the pestilence!