
*The Canterbury Tales and
Other Poems
Part 6: The Miller's Tale*



by Geoffrey Chaucer

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THE PROLOGUE

When that the Knight had thus his tale told
In all the rout was neither young nor old,
That he not said it was a noble story,
And worthy to be drawn to memory¹;
And namely the gentles² every one.
Our Host then laugh'd and swore, "So may I gon,³
This goes aright; unbuckled is the mail⁴;
Let see now who shall tell another tale:
For truely this game is well begun.
Now telleth ye, Sir Monk, if that ye conne⁵,
Somewhat, to quiten⁶ with the Knighte's tale."
The Miller that fordrunken was all pale,
So that unnethes⁷ upon his horse he sat,
He would avalen⁸ neither hood nor hat,
Nor abide⁹ no man for his courtesy,

¹recorded.

²especially the gentlefolk.

³prosper.

⁴the budget is opened.

⁵know.

⁶match.

⁷with difficulty.

⁸uncover.

⁹give way to.

But in Pilate's voice (*Note 1*) he gan to cry,
And swore by armes, and by blood, and bones,
"I can a noble tale for the nones¹⁰,
With which I will now quite¹¹ the Knighte's tale."
Our Host saw well how drunk he was of ale,
And said; "Robin, abide, my leve¹² brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another:
Abide, and let us worke thriftily."
By Godde's soul," quoth he, "that will not I,
For I will speak, or elles go my way!"
Our Host answer'd; "Tell on a devil way¹³;
Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."
"Now hearken," quoth the Miller, "all and some:
But first I make a protestatioun.
That I am drunk, I know it by my soun':
And therefore if that I misspeak or say,
Wite it¹⁴ the ale of Southwark, I you pray:
For I will tell a legend and a life
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
How that a clerk hath set the wrighte's cap¹⁵."
The Reeve answer'd and saide, "Stint thy clap¹⁶,
Let be thy lewed drunken harlotry.
It is a sin, and eke a great folly
To apeiren¹⁷ any man, or him defame,
And eke to bringe wives in evil name.
Thou may'st enough of other thinges sayn."
This drunken Miller spake full soon again,
And saide, "Leve brother Osewold,

¹⁰occasion.

¹¹match.

¹²dear.

¹³devil take you!

¹⁴blame it on.

¹⁵fooled the carpenter.

¹⁶hold your tongue.

¹⁷injure.

Who hath no wife, he is no cuckold.
But I say not therefore that thou art one;
There be full goode wives many one.
Why art thou angry with my tale now?
I have a wife, pardie, as well as thou,
Yet n'old I¹⁸, for the oxen in my plough,
Taken upon me more than enough,
To deemen¹⁹ of myself that I am one;
I will believe well that I am none.
An husband should not be inquisitive
Of Godde's privity, nor of his wife.
So he may finde Godde's foison²⁰ there,
Of the remnant needeth not to enquire."

What should I more say, but that this Millere
He would his wordes for no man forbear,
But told his churlish²¹ tale in his mannere;
Me thinketh, that I shall rehearse it here.
And therefore every gentle wight I pray,
For Godde's love to deem not that I say
Of evil intent, but that I must rehearse
Their tales all, be they better or worse,
Or elles falsen²² some of my mattere.
And therefore whoso list it not to hear,
Turn o'er the leaf, and choose another tale;
For he shall find enough, both great and smale,
Of storial²³ thing that toucheth gentiless,
And eke morality and holiness.
Blame not me, if that ye choose amiss.
The Miller is a churl, ye know well this,

¹⁸I would not.

¹⁹judge.

²⁰treasure.

²¹boorish, rude.

²²falsify.

²³historical, true.

THE PROLOGUE

So was the Reeve, with many other mo',
And harlotry²⁴ they tolde bothe two.
Avise you²⁵ now, and put me out of blame;
And eke men should not make earnest of game²⁶.

²⁴ribald tales.

²⁵be warned.

²⁶jest, fun.

THE TALE

Whilom there was dwelling in Oxenford
A riche gnof²⁷, that gwestes held to board²⁸,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
With him there was dwelling a poor scholer,
Had learned art, but all his fantasy
Was turned for to learn astrology.
He coude²⁹ a certain of conclusions
To deeme³⁰ by interrogations,
If that men asked him in certain hours,
When that men should have drought or elles
show'rs:
Or if men asked him what shoulde fall
Of everything, I may not reckon all.
This clerk was called Hendy³¹ Nicholas;
Of derne³² love he knew and of solace;
And therewith he was sly and full privy,
And like a maiden meek for to see.
A chamber had he in that hostelry

²⁷miser.

²⁸took in boarders.

²⁹knew.

³⁰determine.

³¹gentle, handsome.

³²secret, earnest.

Alone, withouten any company,
 Full fetisly y-dight³³ with herbes swoot³⁴,
 And he himself was sweet as is the root
 Of liquorice, or any setewall³⁵.
 His Almagest, (*Note 1*) and bookes great and small,
 His astrolabe, (*Note 2*) belonging to his art,
 His augrim stones, (*Note 3*) layed fair apart
 On shelves couched³⁶ at his bedde's head,
 His press y-cover'd with a falding red³⁷.
 And all above there lay a gay psalt'ry
 On which he made at nightes melody,
 So sweetely, that all the chamber rang:
 And Angelus ad virginem (*Note 4*) he sang.
 And after that he sung the kinge's note;
 Full often blessed was his merry throat.
 And thus this sweete clerk his time spent
 After his friendes finding and his rent³⁸

 This carpenter had wedded new a wife,
 Which that he loved more than his life:
 Of eighteen year, I guess, she was of age.
 Jealous he was, and held her narr'w in cage,
 For she was wild and young, and he was old,
 And deemed himself belike³⁹ a cuckold.
 He knew not Cato, (*Note 5*) for his wit was rude,
 That bade a man wed his similitude.
 Men shoulde wedden after their estate,
 For youth and eld⁴⁰ are often at debate.
 But since that he was fallen in the snare,

³³neatly decorated.

³⁴sweet.

³⁵valerian.

³⁶laid, set.

³⁷coarse cloth.

³⁸Attending to his friends, and providing for the cost of his lodging.

³⁹perhaps.

⁴⁰age.

He must endure (as other folk) his care.
 Fair was this younge wife, and therewithal
 As any weasel her body gent⁴¹ and small.
 A seint⁴² she weared, barred all of silk,
 A barm-cloth⁴³ eke as white as morning
 milk (Note 6)
 Upon her lendes⁴⁴, full of many a gore⁴⁵
 White was her smock⁴⁶, and broider'd all before,
 And eke behind, on her collar about
 Of coal-black silk, within and eke without.
 The tapes of her white volupere⁴⁷ (Note 7)
 Were of the same suit of her collere;
 Her fillet broad of silk, and set full high:
 And sickerly⁴⁸ she had a likerous⁴⁹ eye.
 Full small y-pulled were her browes two,
 And they were bent⁵⁰, and black as any sloe.
 She was well more blissful on to see⁵¹
 Than is the newe perjenete⁵² tree;
 And softer than the wool is of a wether.
 And by her girdle hung a purse of leather,
 Tassel'd with silk, and pearled with latoun⁵³.
 In all this world to seeken up and down
 There is no man so wise, that coude

⁴¹slim, neat.

⁴²girdle.

⁴³apron.

⁴⁴loins.

⁴⁵plait.

⁴⁶robe or gown.

⁴⁷head-kerchief.

⁴⁸certainly.

⁴⁹lascivious.

⁵⁰arched.

⁵¹pleasant to look upon

⁵²young pear-tree.

⁵³set with brass pearls.

thenche⁵⁴ (*Note 8*)

So gay a popelot, or such a wench.
 Full brighter was the shining of her hue,
 Than in the Tower the noble⁵⁵ forged new (*Note*
 9)

But of her song, it was as loud and yern⁵⁶, (*Note*
 10)

As any swallow chittering on a bern⁵⁷.
 Thereto she coulde skip, and make a game⁵⁸
 As any kid or calf following his dame.
 Her mouth was sweet as braket, (*Note 11*) or as
 methe⁵⁹

Or hoard of apples, laid in hay or heath.
 Wincing⁶⁰ she was as is a jolly colt,
 Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
 A brooch she bare upon her low collere,
 As broad as is the boss of a bucklere.
 Her shoon were laced on her legges high;
 She was a primerole⁶¹, a piggesnie, (*Note 12*)
 For any lord t' have ligging⁶² in his bed,
 Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

Now, sir, and eft⁶³ sir, so befell the case,
 That on a day this Hendy Nicholas
 Fell with this younge wife to rage⁶⁴ and play,
 While that her husband was at Oseney, (*Note 13*)

⁵⁴fancy, think of puppet.

⁵⁵a gold coin.

⁵⁶lively.

⁵⁷barn.

⁵⁸also "romp".

⁵⁹mead.

⁶⁰skittish.

⁶¹primrose..

⁶²lying.

⁶³again.

⁶⁴toy, play the rogue.

As clerkes be full subtle and full quaint.
And privily he caught her by the queint⁶⁵,
And said; "Y-wis⁶⁶, but if I have my will,
For derne love of thee, leman, I spill⁶⁷"
And helde her fast by the haunche bones,
And saide "Leman, love me well at once,
Or I will dien, all so God me save."
And she sprang as a colt doth in the trave (*Note 14*):
And with her head she writhed fast away,
And said; "I will not kiss thee, by my fay⁶⁸
Why let be," quoth she, "let be, Nicholas,
Or I will cry out harow and alas! (*Note 15*)
Do away your handes, for your courtesy."
This Nicholas gan mercy for to cry,
And spake so fair, and proffer'd him so fast,
That she her love him granted at the last,
And swore her oath by Saint Thomas of Kent,
That she would be at his commandement,
When that she may her leisure well espy.
"My husband is so full of jealousy,
That but⁶⁹ ye waite well, and be privy,
I wot right well I am but dead," quoth she.
"Ye muste be full derne⁷⁰ as in this case."
"Nay, thereof care thee nought," quoth Nicholas:
"A clerk had litherly beset his while⁷¹,
But if⁷² he could a carpenter beguile."
And thus they were accorded and y-sworn
To wait a time, as I have said befor.

⁶⁵cunt.

⁶⁶assuredly.

⁶⁷for earnest love of thee my mistress, I perish.

⁶⁸faith.

⁶⁹unless.

⁷⁰secret.

⁷¹ill spent his time.

⁷²unless.

When Nicholas had done thus every deal⁷³,
 And thwacked her about the lendes⁷⁴ well,
 He kiss'd her sweet, and taketh his psalt'ry
 And playeth fast, and maketh melody.
 Then fell it thus, that to the parish church,
 Of Christe's owen workes for to wurch⁷⁵,
 This good wife went upon a holy day;
 Her forehead shone as bright as any day,
 So was it washen, when she left her werk.

Now was there of that church a parish clerk,
 The which that was y-cleped Absolon.
 Curl'd was his hair, and as the gold it shone,
 And strutted⁷⁶ as a fanne large and broad;
 Full straight and even lay his jolly shode⁷⁷.
 His rode⁷⁸ was red, his eyen grey as goose,
 With Paule's windows carven on his shoes (Note
 16)

In hosen red he went full fetisly⁷⁹.
 Y-clad he was full small and properly,
 All in a kirtle⁸⁰ of a light waget⁸¹;
 Full fair and thicke be the pointes set,
 And thereupon he had a gay surplice,
 As white as is the blossom on the rise⁸² (Note 17)
 A merry child he was, so God me save;
 Well could he letten blood, and clip, and shave,
 And make a charter of land, and a quittance.

⁷³whit.

⁷⁴loins.

⁷⁵work.

⁷⁶stretched.

⁷⁷head of hair.

⁷⁸complexion.

⁷⁹daintily, neatly.

⁸⁰girdle.

⁸¹sky blue.

⁸²twig.

In twenty manners could he trip and dance,
 After the school of Oxenforde tho⁸³, (*Note 18*)
 And with his legges caste to and fro;
 And playen songes on a small ribible⁸⁴;
 Thereto he sung sometimes a loud quibble⁸⁵
 And as well could he play on a giter⁸⁶
 In all the town was brewhouse nor tavern,
 That he not visited with his solas⁸⁷,
 There as that any garnard tapstere⁸⁸ was.
 But sooth to say he was somedeal squaimous⁸⁹
 Of farting, and of speche dangerous.
 This Absolon, that jolly was and gay,
 Went with a censer on the holy day,
 Censing⁹⁰ the wives of the parish fast;
 And many a lovely look he on them cast,
 And namely⁹¹ on this carpenter's wife:
 To look on her him thought a merry life.
 She was so proper, and sweet, and likerous.
 I dare well say, if she had been a mouse,
 And he a cat, he would her hent anon⁹².
 This parish clerk, this jolly Absolon,
 Hath in his hearte such a love-longing!
 That of no wife took he none offering;
 For courtesy he said he woulde none.
 The moon at night full clear and brighte shone,
 And Absolon his giter⁸⁶ hath y-taken,

⁸³them.

⁸⁴fiddle.

⁸⁵treble.

⁸⁶guitar.

⁸⁷mirth, sport.

⁸⁸licentious barmaid.

⁸⁹squeamish.

⁹⁰burning incense for.

⁹¹especially.

⁹²have soon caught her.

For paramours he thoughte for to waken,
And forth he went, jolif⁹³ and amorous,
Till he came to the carpentere's house,
A little after the cock had y-crow,
And dressed him⁹⁴ under a shot window (*Note*
19),

That was upon the carpentere's wall.
He singeth in his voice gentle and small;
"Now, dear lady, if thy will be,
I pray that ye will rue on me⁹⁵;
Full well accordant to his giterning.
This carpenter awoke, and heard him sing,
And spake unto his wife, and said anon,
What Alison, hear'st thou not Absolon,
That chanteth thus under our bower⁹⁶ wall?"
And she answer'd her husband therewithal;
"Yes, God wot, John, I hear him every deal."
This passeth forth; what will ye bet⁹⁷ than well?

From day to day this jolly Absolon
So wooeth her, that him is woebegone.
He waketh all the night, and all the day,
To comb his lockes broad, and make him gay.
He wooeth her by means and by brocage⁹⁸,
And swore he woulde be her owen page.
He singeth brokking⁹⁹ as a nightingale.
He sent her piment (*Note 20*), mead, and spiced
ale,

⁹³joyous.

⁹⁴stationed himself.

⁹⁵take pity.

⁹⁶chamber.

⁹⁷better.

⁹⁸by presents and by agents.

⁹⁹quavering.

And wafers¹⁰⁰ piping hot out of the glede¹⁰¹:
And, for she was of town, he proffer'd meed. (*Note*
21)

For some folk will be wonnen for richness,
And some for strokes, and some with gentiless.
Sometimes, to show his lightness and mast'ry,
He playeth Herod (*Note* 22) on a scaffold high.
But what availeth him as in this case?
So loveth she the Hendy Nicholas,
That Absolon may blow the bucke's horn¹⁰²:
He had for all his labour but a scorn.
And thus she maketh Absolon her ape,
And all his earnest turneth to a jape¹⁰³.
Full sooth is this proverb, it is no lie;
Men say right thus alway; the nighe sly
Maketh oft time the far lief to be loth. (*Note* 23)
For though that Absolon be wood¹⁰⁴ or wroth
Because that he far was from her sight,
This nigh Nicholas stood still in his light.
Now bear thee well, thou Hendy Nicholas,
For Absolon may wail and sing "Alas!"

And so befell, that on a Saturday
This carpenter was gone to Oseney,
And Hendy Nicholas and Alison
Accorded were to this conclusion,
That Nicholas shall shape him a wile¹⁰⁵
The silly jealous husband to beguile;
And if so were the game went aright,
She shoulde sleepen in his arms all night;
For this was her desire and his also.

¹⁰⁰cakes.

¹⁰¹coals.

¹⁰²"go whistle".

¹⁰³jest.

¹⁰⁴mad.

¹⁰⁵devise a stratagem.

And right anon, withoute wordes mo',
 This Nicholas no longer would he tarry,
 But doth full soft unto his chamber carry
 Both meat and drinke for a day or tway.
 And to her husband bade her for to say,
 If that he asked after Nicholas,
 She shoulde say, "She wist¹⁰⁶ not where he was;
 Of all the day she saw him not with eye;
 She trowed¹⁰⁷ he was in some malady,
 For no cry that her maiden could him call
 He would answer, for nought that might befall."
 Thus passed forth all thilke¹⁰⁸ Saturday,
 That Nicholas still in his chamber lay,
 And ate, and slept, and didde what him list
 Till Sunday, that¹⁰⁹ the sunne went to rest.
 This silly carpenter had great marvail¹¹⁰
 Of Nicholas, or what thing might him ail,
 And said; "I am adrad¹¹¹, by Saint Thomas!
 It standeth not aright with Nicholas:
 God shilde¹¹² that he died suddenly.
 This world is now full fickle sickerly¹¹³.
 I saw to-day a corpse y-borne to chirch,
 That now on Monday last I saw him wirch¹¹⁴.
 "Go up," quod he unto his knave¹¹⁵, "anon;
 Clepe¹¹⁶ at his door, or knocke with a stone:

¹⁰⁶knew.

¹⁰⁷believed.

¹⁰⁸that.

¹⁰⁹when.

¹¹⁰wondered greatly.

¹¹¹afraid, in dread.

¹¹²heaven forbid!

¹¹³certainly.

¹¹⁴work.

¹¹⁵servant.

¹¹⁶call.

Look how it is, and tell me boldly."
This knave went him up full sturdily,
And, at the chamber door while that he stood,
He cried and knocked as that he were wood¹¹⁷:
"What how? what do ye, Master Nicholay?
How may ye sleepen all the longe day?"
But all for nought, he hearde not a word.
An hole he found full low upon the board,
Where as the cat was wont in for to creep,
And at that hole he looked in full deep,
And at the last he had of him a sight.
This Nicholas sat ever gaping upright,
As he had kyked¹¹⁸ on the newe moon. (Note 24)
Adown he went, and told his master soon,
In what array he saw this ilke¹¹⁹ man.

This carpenter to blissen him¹²⁰ began,
And said: "Now help us, Sainte Frideswide. (Note
25)

A man wot¹²¹ little what shall him betide.
This man is fall'n with his astronomy
Into some woodness¹²² or some agony.
I thought aye well how that it shoulde be.
Men should know nought of Godde's privity¹²³.
Yea, blessed be alway a lewed¹²⁴ man,
That nought but only his believe can¹²⁵.
So far'd another clerk with astronomy:
He walked in the fieldes for to pry

¹¹⁷mad.

¹¹⁸looked.

¹¹⁹same.

¹²⁰bless, cross himself.

¹²¹knows.

¹²²madness.

¹²³secrets.

¹²⁴unlearned.

¹²⁵knows no more than his "credo".

Upon the starres¹²⁶, what there should befall,
 Till he was in a marle pit y-fall. (*Note 26*)
 He saw not that. But yet, by Saint Thomas!
 Me rueth sore of¹²⁷ Hendy Nicholas:
 He shall be rated of¹²⁸ his studying,
 If that I may, by Jesus, heaven's king!
 Get me a staff, that I may underspore¹²⁹
 While that thou, Robin, hevest off the door:
 He shall out of his studying, as I guess."
 And to the chamber door he gan him dress¹³⁰
 His knave was a strong carl for the nonce,
 And by the hasp he heav'd it off at once;
 Into the floor the door fell down anon.
 This Nicholas sat aye as still as stone,
 And ever he gap'd upward into the air.

The carpenter ween'd¹³¹ he were in despair,
 And hent¹³² him by the shoulders mightily,
 And shook him hard, and cried spitously¹³³;
 "What, Nicholas? what how, man? look adown:
 Awake, and think on Christe's passioun.
 I crouche thee (*Note 27*) from elves, and from
 wights¹³⁴.
 Therewith the night-spell said he anon rights¹³⁵,
 On the four halves¹³⁶ of the house about,
 And on the threshold of the door without.

¹²⁶keep watch on.

¹²⁷I am very sorry for.

¹²⁸chidden for.

¹²⁹lever up.

¹³⁰apply himself.

¹³¹thought.

¹³²caught.

¹³³angrily.

¹³⁴witches.

¹³⁵properly.

¹³⁶corners.

"Lord Jesus Christ, and Sainte Benedight,
 Blesse this house from every wicked wight,
 From the night mare, the white Pater-noster;
 Where wonnest¹³⁷ thou now, Sainte Peter's sister?"
 And at the last this Hendy Nicholas
 Gan for to sigh full sore, and said; "Alas!
 Shall all time world be lost eftsoones¹³⁸ now?"
 This carpenter answer'd; "What sayest thou?
 What? think on God, as we do, men that swink¹³⁹."
 This Nicholas answer'd; "Fetch me a drink;
 And after will I speak in privity
 Of certain thing that toucheth thee and me:
 I will tell it no other man certain."
 This carpenter went down, and came again,
 And brought of mighty ale a large quart;
 And when that each of them had drunk his part,
 This Nicholas his chamber door fast shet¹⁴⁰,
 And down the carpenter by him he set,
 And saide; "John, mine host full lief¹⁴¹ and dear,
 Thou shalt upon thy truthe swear me here,
 That to no wight thou shalt my counsel wray¹⁴²:
 For it is Christes counsel that I say,
 And if thou tell it man, thou art forlore¹⁴³: (Note
 28)
 For this vengeance thou shalt have therefor,
 That if thou wraye¹⁴⁴ me, thou shalt be wood¹⁴⁵."
 "Nay, Christ forbid it for his holy blood!"

¹³⁷ dwellest.

¹³⁸ forthwith.

¹³⁹ labour.

¹⁴⁰ shut.

¹⁴¹ loved.

¹⁴² betray.

¹⁴³ lost.

¹⁴⁴ betray.

¹⁴⁵ mad.

Quoth then this silly man; "I am no blab¹⁴⁶,
 Nor, though I say it, am I lief to gab¹⁴⁷.
 Say what thou wilt, I shall it never tell
 To child or wife, by him that harried Hell." (Note
 29)

"Now, John," quoth Nicholas, "I will not lie,
 I have y-found in my astrology,
 As I have looked in the moone bright,
 That now on Monday next, at quarter night,
 Shall fall a rain, and that so wild and wood¹⁴⁸,
 That never half so great was Noe's flood.
 This world," he said, "in less than half an hour
 Shall all be dreint¹⁴⁹, so hideous is the shower:
 Thus shall mankinde drench¹⁵⁰, and lose their life."
 This carpenter answer'd; "Alas, my wife!
 And shall she drench? alas, mine Alisoun!"
 For sorrow of this he fell almost adown,
 And said; "Is there no remedy in this case?"
 "Why, yes, for God," quoth Hendy Nicholas;
 "If thou wilt worken after¹⁵¹;
 Thou may'st not worken after thine own head.
 For thus saith Solomon, that was full true:
 Work all by counsel, and thou shalt not rue¹⁵²
 And if thou worke wilt by good counsel,
 I undertake, withoute mast or sail,
 Yet shall I save her, and thee, and me.
 Hast thou not heard how saved was Noe,
 When that our Lord had warned him befor,

¹⁴⁶talker.

¹⁴⁷fond of speech.

¹⁴⁸mad.

¹⁴⁹drowned.

¹⁵⁰drown.

¹⁵¹learning and advice.

¹⁵²repent.

That all the world with water should be lorn¹⁵³?"
 "Yes," quoth this carpenter, "full yore ago¹⁵⁴."
 "Hast thou not heard," quoth Nicholas, "also
 The sorrow of Noe, with his fellowship,
 That he had ere he got his wife to ship? (Note 30)
 Him had been lever, I dare well undertake,
 At thilke time, than all his wethers black,
 That she had had a ship herself alone. (Note 31)
 And therefore know'st thou what is best to be
 done?"

This asketh haste, and of an hasty thing
 Men may not preach or make tarrying.
 Anon go get us fast into this inn¹⁵⁵
 A kneading trough, or else a kemelin¹⁵⁶,
 For each of us; but look that they be large,
 In whiche we may swim¹⁵⁷ as in a barge:
 And have therein vitaille suffisant
 But for one day; fie on the remenant;
 The water shall aslake¹⁵⁸ and go away
 Aboute prime¹⁵⁹ upon the nexte day.
 But Robin may not know of this, thy knave¹⁶⁰,
 Nor eke thy maiden Gill I may not save:
 Ask me not why: for though thou aske me
 I will not telle Godde's privity.
 Sufficeth thee, but if thy wit be mad¹⁶¹,
 To have as great a grace as Noe had;
 Thy wife shall I well saven out of doubt.

¹⁵³should perish.

¹⁵⁴long since.

¹⁵⁵house.

¹⁵⁶brewing-tub.

¹⁵⁷float.

¹⁵⁸slacken, abate.

¹⁵⁹early morning.

¹⁶⁰servant.

¹⁶¹unless thou be out of thy wits.

Go now thy way, and speed thee hereabout.
 But when thou hast for her, and thee, and me,
 Y-gotten us these kneading tubbes three,
 Then shalt thou hang them in the roof full high,
 So that no man our purveyance¹⁶² espy:
 And when thou hast done thus as I have said,
 And hast our vitaille fair in them y-laid,
 And eke an axe to smite the cord in two
 When that the water comes, that we may go,
 And break an hole on high upon the gable
 Into the garden-ward, over the stable,
 That we may freely passe forth our way,
 When that the greate shower is gone away.
 Then shalt thou swim as merry, I undertake,
 As doth the white duck after her drake:
 Then will I clepe¹⁶³, 'How, Alison? How, John?
 Be merry: for the flood will pass anon.'
 And thou wilt say, 'Hail, Master Nicholay,
 Good-morrow, I see thee well, for it is day.'
 And then shall we be lordes all our life
 Of all the world, as Noe and his wife.
 But of one thing I warne thee full right,
 Be well advised, on that ilke¹⁶⁴ night,
 When we be enter'd into shippe's board,
 That none of us not speak a single word,
 Nor clepe nor cry, but be in his prayere,
 For that is Godde's owen heste¹⁶⁵ dear.
 Thy wife and thou must hangen far atween¹⁶⁶,
 For that betwixte you shall be no sin,
 No more in looking than there shall in deed.
 This ordinance is said: go, God thee speed

¹⁶²foresight, providence.

¹⁶³call.

¹⁶⁴same.

¹⁶⁵command.

¹⁶⁶asunder.

To-morrow night, when men be all asleep,
 Into our kneading tubbes will we creep,
 And sitte there, abiding Godde's grace.
 Go now thy way, I have no longer space
 To make of this no longer sermoning:
 Men say thus: Send the wise, and say nothing:
 Thou art so wise, it needeth thee nought teach.
 Go, save our lives, and that I thee beseech."
 This silly carpenter went forth his way,
 Full oft he said, "Alas! and Well-a-day!,"
 And to his wife he told his privity,
 And she was ware, and better knew than he
 What all this quainteste cast was for to say¹⁶⁷.
 But natheless she fear'd as she would dey,
 And said: "Alas! go forth thy way anon.
 Help us to scape, or we be dead each one.
 I am thy true and very wedded wife;
 Go, deare spouse, and help to save our life."
 Lo, what a great thing is affection!
 Men may die of imagination,
 So deeply may impression be take.
 This silly carpenter begins to quake:
 He thinketh verily that he may see
 This newe flood come weltering as the sea
 To drenchen¹⁶⁸ Alison, his honey dear.
 He weepeth, waileth, maketh sorry cheer¹⁶⁹;
 He sigheth, with full many a sorry sough¹⁷⁰.
 He go'th, and getteth him a kneading trough,
 And after that a tub, and a kemelin,
 And privily he sent them to his inn:
 And hung them in the roof full privily.
 With his own hand then made he ladders three,

¹⁶⁷strange contrivance meand

¹⁶⁸drown.

¹⁶⁹dismal countenance.

¹⁷⁰groan.

To climbe by the ranges and the stalks¹⁷¹
 Unto the tubbes hanging in the balks¹⁷²;
 And victualed them, kemelin, trough, and tub,
 With bread and cheese, and good ale in a jub¹⁷³,
 Sufficing right enough as for a day.
 But ere that he had made all this array,
 He sent his knave¹⁷⁴, and eke his wench¹⁷⁵ also,
 Upon his need¹⁷⁶ to London for to go.
 And on the Monday, when it drew to night,
 He shut his door withoute candle light,
 And dressed¹⁷⁷ every thing as it should be.
 And shortly up they climbed all the three.
 They satte stille well a furlong way¹⁷⁸
 "Now, Pater noster, clum," (*Note 32*) said Nicholay,
 And "clum," quoth John; and "clum," said Alison:
 This carpenter said his devotion,
 And still he sat and bidden his prayere,
 Awaking on the rain, if he it hear.
 The deade sleep, for weary business,
 Fell on this carpenter, right as I guess,
 About the curfew-time, (*Note 33*) or little more,
 For travail of his ghost¹⁷⁹ he groaned sore,
 And eft he routed, for his head mislay¹⁸⁰
 Adown the ladder stalked Nicholay;
 And Alison full soft adown she sped.
 Withoute wordes more they went to bed,

¹⁷¹the rungs and the uprights.

¹⁷²beams.

¹⁷³jug.

¹⁷⁴servant.

¹⁷⁵maid.

¹⁷⁶business.

¹⁷⁷prepared.

¹⁷⁸the time it would take to walk a furlong.

¹⁷⁹anguish of spirit.

¹⁸⁰and then he snored, for his head lay awry.

There as¹⁸¹ the carpenter was wont to lie:
 There was the revel, and the melody.
 And thus lay Alison and Nicholas,
 In business of mirth and in solace,
 Until the bell of laudes¹⁸² gan to ring,
 And friars in the chancel went to sing.

This parish clerk, this amorous Absolon,
 That is for love alway so woebegone,
 Upon the Monday was at Oseney
 With company, him to disport and play;
 And asked upon cas¹⁸³ a cloisterer¹⁸⁴ =
 Full privily after John the carpenter;
 And he drew him apart out of the church,
 And said, "I n'ot¹⁸⁵; I saw him not here wirch¹⁸⁶
 Since Saturday; I trow that he be went
 For timber, where our abbot hath him sent.
 And dwellen at the Grange a day or two:
 For he is wont for timber for to go,
 Or else he is at his own house certain.
 Where that he be, I cannot soothly say¹⁸⁷."
 This Absolon full jolly was and light,
 And thought, "Now is the time to wake all night,
 For sickerly¹⁸⁸ I saw him not stirring
 About his door, since day began to spring.
 So may I thrive, but I shall at cock crow
 Full privily go knock at his window,
 That stands full low upon his bower¹⁸⁹ wall:

¹⁸¹wgere.

¹⁸²morning service, at 3.a.m..

¹⁸³occasion.

¹⁸⁴monk.

¹⁸⁵know not.

¹⁸⁶work.

¹⁸⁷say certainly.

¹⁸⁸certainly.

¹⁸⁹chamber.

To Alison then will I tellen all
 My love-longing; for I shall not miss
 That at the leaste way I shall her kiss.
 Some manner comfort shall I have, parfay¹⁹⁰.
 My mouth hath itched all this livelong day:
 That is a sign of kissing at the least.
 All night I mette¹⁹¹ eke I was at a feast.
 Therefore I will go sleep an hour or tway,
 And all the night then will I wake and play."
 When that the first cock crowed had, anon
 Up rose this jolly lover Absolon,
 And him arrayed gay, at point devise¹⁹².
 But first he chewed grains (*Note 34*) and liquorice,
 To smelle sweet, ere he had combed his hair.
 Under his tongue a true love (*Note 35*) he bare,
 For thereby thought he to be gracious.

 Then came he to the carpentere's house,
 And still he stood under the shot window;
 Unto his breast it raught¹⁹³, it was so low;
 And soft he coughed with a semisoun'¹⁹⁴.
 "What do ye, honeycomb, sweet Alisoun?
 My faire bird, my sweet cinamom¹⁹⁵,
 Awaken, leman¹⁹⁶ mine, and speak to me.
 Full little thinke ye upon my woe,
 That for your love I sweat there as¹⁹⁷ I go.
 No wonder is that I do swelt¹⁹⁸ and sweat.
 I mourn as doth a lamb after the teat

¹⁹⁰by my faith.

¹⁹¹dreamt.

¹⁹²with exact care.

¹⁹³reached.

¹⁹⁴low tone.

¹⁹⁵cinnamon, sweet spice.

¹⁹⁶mistress.

¹⁹⁷wherever.

¹⁹⁸faint.

Y-wis¹⁹⁹, leman, I have such love-longing,
 That like a turtle²⁰⁰ true is my mourning.
 I may not eat, no more than a maid."
 "Go from the window, thou jack fool," she said:
 "As help me God, it will not be, 'come ba²⁰¹ me.'
 I love another, else I were to blame",
 Well better than thee, by Jesus, Absolon.
 Go forth thy way, or I will cast a stone;
 And let me sleep; a twenty devil way²⁰².
 "Alas!" quoth Absolon, "and well away!
 That true love ever was so ill beset:
 Then kiss me, since that it may be no bet²⁰³,
 For Jesus' love, and for the love of me."
 "Wilt thou then go thy way therewith?" , quoth she.
 "Yea, certes, leman," quoth this Absolon.
 "Then make thee ready," quoth she, "I come anon."
 (And unto Nicholas she said full still²⁰⁴:
 "Now peace, and thou shalt laugh anon thy fill."
 (*Note 36*)
 This Absolon down set him on his knees,
 And said; "I am a lord at all degrees:
 For after this I hope there cometh more;
 Lemman, thy grace, and, sweete bird, thine ore²⁰⁵."
 The window she undid, and that in haste.
 "Have done," quoth she, "come off, and speed thee
 fast,
 Lest that our neigheours should thee espy."
 Then Absolon gan wipe his mouth full dry.
 Dark was the night as pitch or as the coal,

¹⁹⁹certainly.

²⁰⁰turtle-dove.

²⁰¹kiss.

²⁰²twenty devils take ye!

²⁰³better.

²⁰⁴in a low voice.

²⁰⁵favour.

And at the window she put out her hole,
 And Absolon him fell ne bet ne werse,
 But with his mouth he kiss'd her naked erse
 Full savourly. When he was ware of this,
 Aback he start, and thought it was amiss;
 For well he wist a woman hath no beard.
 He felt a thing all rough, and long y-hair'd,
 And saide; "Fy, alas! what have I do?"
 "Te he!" quoth she, and clapt the window to;
 And Absolon went forth at sorry pace.
 "A beard, a beard," said Hendy Nicholas;
 "By God's corpus, this game went fair and well."
 This silly Absolon heard every deal²⁰⁶,
 And on his lip he gan for anger bite;
 And to himself he said, "I shall thee quite²⁰⁷,
 Who rubbeth now, who frotteth²⁰⁸ now his lips
 With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with
 chips,
 But Absolon? that saith full oft, "Alas!
 My soul betake I unto Sathanas,
 But me were lever²⁰⁹ than all this town," quoth he
 I this despite awroken²¹⁰ for to be.
 Alas! alas! that I have been y-blent²¹¹."
 His hote love is cold, and all y-quent²¹².
 For from that time that he had kiss'd her erse,
 Of paramours he sette not a kers²¹³,
 For he was healed of his malady;
 Full often paramours he gan defy,

²⁰⁶word.

²⁰⁷requite, be even with.

²⁰⁸rubs.

²⁰⁹rather.

²¹⁰revenged.

²¹¹deceived.

²¹²quenched.

²¹³cared not a rush.

And weep as doth a child that hath been beat.
 A softe pace he went over the street
 Unto a smith, men callen Dan²¹⁴ Gerveis,
 That in his forge smithed plough-harness;
 He sharped share and culter busily.
 This Absolon knocked all easily,
 And said; "Undo, Gerveis, and that anon."
 "What, who art thou?" "It is I, Absolon."
 "What? Absolon, what? Christe's sweete tree²¹⁵.
 Why rise so rath²¹⁶? hey! Benedicite,
 What aileth you? some gay girl, (*Note 37*) God it
 wote,
 Hath brought you thus upon the viretote: (*Note 38*)
 By Saint Neot, ye wot well what I mean."
 This Absolon he raughte²¹⁷ not a bean
 Of all his play; no word again he gaf²¹⁸.
 For he had more tow on his distaff (*Note 39*)
 Than Gerveis knew, and saide; "Friend so dear,
 That hote culter in the chimney here
 Lend it to me, I have therewith to don²¹⁹:
 I will it bring again to thee full soon."
 Gerveis answered; "Certes, were it gold,
 Or in a poke²²⁰ nobles all untold,
 Thou shouldst it have, as I am a true smith.
 Hey! Christe's foot, what will ye do therewith?"
 "Thereof," quoth Absolon, "be as be may;
 I shall well tell it thee another day:"
 And caught the culter by the colde stele²²¹.

²¹⁴master.

²¹⁵cross.

²¹⁶early.

²¹⁷recked, cared.

²¹⁸spoke.

²¹⁹do.

²²⁰purse.

²²¹handle.

Full soft out at the door he gan to steal,
 And went unto the carpentere's wall
 He coughed first, and knocked therewithal
 Upon the window, light as he did ere²²². (Note 40)
 This Alison answered; "Who is there
 That knocketh so? I warrant him a thief."
 "Nay, nay," quoth he, "God wot, my sweete lefe²²³,
 I am thine Absolon, my own darling.
 Of gold," quoth he, "I have thee brought a ring,
 My mother gave it me, so God me save!
 Full fine it is, and thereto well y-grave²²⁴:
 This will I give to thee, if thou me kiss."
 Now Nicholas was risen up to piss,
 And thought he would amenden all the jape²²⁵;
 He shoulde kiss his erse ere that he scape:
 And up the window did he hastily,
 And out his erse he put full privily
 Over the buttock, to the haunche bone.
 And therewith spake this clerk, this Absolon,
 "Speak, sweete bird, I know not where thou art."
 This Nicholas anon let fly a fart,
 As great as it had been a thunder dent²²⁶;
 That with the stroke he was well nigh y-blent²²⁷;
 But he was ready with his iron hot,
 And Nicholas amid the erse he smote.
 Off went the skin an handbreadth all about.
 The hote culter burned so his tout²²⁸,
 That for the smart he weened²²⁹ he would die;

²²²before.

²²³love.

²²⁴engraved.

²²⁵improve the joke.

²²⁶peal, clap.

²²⁷blinded.

²²⁸breech.

²²⁹thought.

As he were wood²³⁰, for woe he gan to cry,
 "Help! water, water, help for Godde's heart!"
 This carpenter out of his slumber start,
 And heard one cry "Water," as he were wood²³¹,
 And thought, "Alas! now cometh Noe's flood."
 He sat him up withoute wordes mo'
 And with his axe he smote the cord in two;
 And down went all; he found neither to sell
 Nor bread nor ale, till he came to the sell²³², (*Note*
 41)
 Upon the floor, and there in swoon he lay.
 Up started Alison and Nicholay,
 And cried out an "harow!" (*Note 15*) in the street.
 The neighbours alle, bothe small and great
 In ranne, for to gauren²³³ on this man,
 That yet in swoone lay, both pale and wan:
 For with the fall he broken had his arm.
 But stand he must unto his owen harm,
 For when he spake, he was anon borne down
 With Hendy Nicholas and Alisoun.
 They told to every man that he was wood²³⁴;
 He was aghaste²³⁵ so of Noe's flood,
 Through phantasy, that of his vanity
 He had y-bought him kneading-tubbes three,
 And had them hanged in the roof above;
 And that he prayed them for Godde's love
 To sitten in the roof for company.
 The folk gan laughen at his phantasy.
 Into the roof they kyken²³⁶ and they gape,

²³⁰mad.

²³¹mad.

²³²threshold,

²³³stare.

²³⁴mad.

²³⁵afraid.

²³⁶peep, look.

And turned all his harm into a jape²³⁷
For whatsoever this carpenter answer'd,
It was for nought, no man his reason heard.
With oathes great he was so sworn adown,
That he was holden wood in all the town.
For every clerk anon right held with other;
They said, "The man was wood, my leve²³⁸
brother;"
And every wight gan laughen at his strife.
Thus swived²³⁹ was the carpentere's wife,
For all his keeping²⁴⁰ and his jealousy;
And Absolon hath kiss'd her nether eye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the tout.
This tale is done, and God save all the rout²⁴¹.

²³⁷jest.

²³⁸dear.

²³⁹enjoyed.

²⁴⁰care.

²⁴¹company.

NOTES

1. Almagest: The book of Ptolemy the astronomer, which formed the canon of astrological science in the middle ages.

2. Astrolabe: "Astrelagour," "astrelabore"; a mathematical instrument for taking the altitude of the sun or stars.

3. "Augrim" is a corruption of algorithm, the Arabian term for numeration; "augrim stones," therefore were probably marked with numerals, and used as counters.

4. Angelus ad virginem: The Angel's salutation to Mary; Luke i. 28. It was the "Ave Maria" of the Catholic Church service.

5. Cato: Though Chaucer may have referred to the famous Censor, more probably the reference is merely to the "Moral Distichs," which go under his name, though written after his time; and in a supplement to which the quoted passage may be found.

6. Barm-cloth: apron; from Anglo-Saxon "barme," bosom or lap.

7. Volupere: Head-gear, kerchief; from French, "envelopper," to wrap up.

8. Popelet: Puppet; but chiefly; young wench.

9. Noble: nobles were gold coins of especial purity and brightness; "Ex auro nobilissimi, unde nobilis vocatus,"

(made from the noblest (purest) gold, and therefore called nobles) says Vossius.

10. Yern: Shrill, lively; German, "gern," willingly, cheerfully.

11. Braket: bragget, a sweet drink made of honey, spices, &c. In some parts of the country, a drink made from honey-comb, after the honey is extracted, is still called "bragwort."

12. Piggiesnie: a fond term, like "my duck;" from Anglo-Saxon, "piga," a young maid; but Tyrwhitt associates it with the Latin, "ocellus," little eye, a fondling term, and suggests that the "pigs-eye," which is very small, was applied in the same sense. Davenport and Butler both use the word pigsnie, the first for "darling," the second literally for "eye;" and Bishop Gardner, "On True Obedience," in his address to the reader, says: "How softly she was wont to chirpe him under the chin, and kiss him; how prettily she could talk to him (how doth my sweet heart, what saith now pig's-eye)."

13. Oseney: A once well-known abbey near Oxford.

14. Trave: travis; a frame in which unruly horses were shod.

15. Harow and Alas: Haro! was an old Norman cry for redress or aid. The "Clameur de Haro" was lately raised, under peculiar circumstances, as the prelude to a legal protest, in Jersey.

16. His shoes were ornamented like the windows of St. Paul's, especially like the old rose-window.

17. Rise: Twig, bush; German, "Reis," a twig; "Reisig," a copse.

18. Chaucer satirises the dancing of Oxford as he did the French of Stratford at Bow.

19. Shot window: A projecting or bow window, whence it was possible shoot at any one approaching the door.

20. Piment: A drink made with wine, honey, and spices.

21. Because she was town-bred, he offered wealth, or money reward, for her love.

22. Parish-clerks, like Absolon, had leading parts in the mysteries or religious plays; Herod was one of these parts, which may have been an object of competition among the amateurs of the period.

."The nighe sly maketh oft time the far lief to be loth": a proverb; the cunning one near at hand oft makes the loving one afar off to be odious. 1

24. Kyked: Looked; "keek" is still used in some parts in the sense of "peep."

25. Saint Frideswide was the patroness of a considerable priory at Oxford, and held there in high repute.

26. Plato, in his "Theatetus," tells this story of Thales; but it has since appeared in many other forms.

27. Crouche: protect by signing the sign of the cross.

28. Forlore: lost; german, "verloren."

29. Him that harried Hell: Christ who wasted or subdued hell: in the middle ages, some very active exploits against the prince of darkness and his powers were ascribed by the monkish tale-tellers to the saviour after he had "descended into hell."

30. According to the old mysteries, Noah's wife refused to come into the ark, and bade her husband row forth and get him a new wife, because he was leaving her gossips in the town to drown. Shem and his brothers got her shipped by main force; and Noah, coming forward to welcome her, was greeted with a box on the ear.

31. "Him had been lever, I dare well undertake, At thilke time, than all his wethers black, That she had had a ship herself alone." i.e. "At that time he would have given all his black wethers, if she had had an ark to herself."

32. "Clum," like "mum," a note of silence; but otherwise explained as the humming sound made in repeating prayers; from the Anglo-Saxon, "clumian," to mutter, speak in an under-tone, keep silence.

33. Curfew-time: Eight in the evening, when, by the law of William the Conqueror, all people were, on ringing of a bell, to extinguish fire and candle, and go to rest; hence the word curfew, from French, "couvre-feu," cover-fire.

34. Absolon chewed grains: these were grains of Paris, or Paradise; a favourite spice.

35. Under his tongue a true love he bare: some sweet herb; another reading, however, is "a true love-knot," which may have been of the nature of a charm.

36. The two lines within brackets are not in most of the editions: they are taken from Urry; whether he supplied them or not, they serve the purpose of a necessary explanation.

37. Gay girl: As applied to a young woman of light manners, this euphemistic phrase has enjoyed a wonderful vitality.

38. Viretote: Urry reads "meritote," and explains it from Spelman as a game in which children made themselves giddy by whirling on ropes. In French, "virer" means to turn; and the explanation may, therefore, suit either reading. In modern slang parlance, Gerveis would probably have said, "on the rampage," or "on the swing" – not very far from Spelman's rendering.

39. He had more tow on his distaff: a proverbial saying: he was playing a deeper game, had more serious business on hand.

40. Ere: before; German, "eher."

41. Sell: sill of the door, threshold; French, "seuil," Latin, "solum," the ground.