
*The Canterbury Tales and
Other Poems
Part 7: The Wife of
Bath's Tale*



by Geoffrey Chaucer

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THE PROLOGUE

(Note 1)

Experience, though none author-
ity¹

¹authoritative texts.

THE PROLOGUE

Were in this world, is right enough
for me
To speak of woe that is in marriage:
For, lordings, since I twelve year
was of age,
(Thanked be God that is etern on
live²),
Husbands at the church door have
I had five, (*Note 2*)
For I so often have y-wedded be,
And all were worthy men in their
degree.
But me was told, not longe time
gone is
That sithen³ Christe went never
but ones

²lives eternally.

³since.

THE PROLOGUE

To wedding, in the Cane⁴ of
Galilee,
That by that ilk⁵ example taught he
me,
That I not wedded shoulde be but
once.
Lo, hearken eke a sharp word for
the nonce⁶,
Beside a welle Jesus, God and man,
Spake in reproof of the Samaritan:
"Thou hast y-had five husbandes,"
said he;
"And thilke⁷ man, that now hath
wedded thee,

⁴Cana.

⁵same.

⁶occasion.

⁷that.

THE PROLOGUE

Is not thine husband:" (*Note 3*) thus
said he certain;
What that he meant thereby, I can-
not sayn.
But that I aske, why the fifthe man
Was not husband to the Samaritan?
How many might she have in mar-
riage?
Yet heard I never tellen in mine
age⁸
Upon this number definitioun.
Men may divine, and glosen⁹ up
and down;
But well I wot, express without a
lie,
God bade us for to wax and multi-

⁸in my life.

⁹comment.

THE PROLOGUE

ply;
That gentle text can I well understand.
Eke well I wot, he said, that mine
 husband
Should leave father and mother,
 and take to me;
But of no number mention made
 he,
Of bigamy or of octogamy;
Why then should men speak of it
 villainy¹⁰?
Lo here, the wise king Dan¹¹
 Solomon, (*Note 4*)
I trow that he had wives more than
 one;

¹⁰as if it were a disgrace.

¹¹Lord.

THE PROLOGUE

As would to God it lawful were to
me
To be refreshed half so oft as he!
What gift¹² of God had he for all
his wives?
No man hath such, that in this
world alive is.
God wot, this noble king, as to my
wit¹³,
The first night had many a merry
fit
With each of them, so well was him
on live¹⁴,
Blessed be God that I have wedded
five!

¹²special favour, licence.

¹³as I understand.

¹⁴so well he lived.

THE PROLOGUE

Welcome the sixth whenever that
he shall.

For since I will not keep me chaste
in all,

When mine husband is from the
world y-gone,

Some Christian man shall wedde
me anon.

For then th' apostle saith that I am
free

To wed, a' God's half¹⁵, where it
liketh me.

He saith, that to be wedded is no
sin;

Better is to be wedded than to
brin¹⁶,

¹⁵on God's part.

¹⁶burn.

THE PROLOGUE

What recketh¹⁷ me though folk say
villainy¹⁸
Of shrewed¹⁹ Lamech, and his
bigamy?
I wot well Abraham was a holy
man,
And Jacob eke, as far as ev'r I
can²⁰.
And each of them had wives more
than two;
And many another holy man also.
Where can ye see, in any manner
age²¹,

¹⁷care.

¹⁸evil.

¹⁹impious, wicked.

²⁰know.

²¹in any period.

THE PROLOGUE

That highe God defended²² marriage (*Note 5*)
By word express? I pray you tell it
me;
Or where commanded he virginity?
I wot as well as you, it is no
dread²³,
Th' apostle, when he spake of
maidenhead,
He said, that precept thereof had
he none:
Men may counsel a woman to be
one²⁴,
But counseling is no commande-

²² forbade.

²³ doubt.

²⁴ a maid.

THE PROLOGUE

ment;
He put it in our owen judgement.
For, hadde God commanded maid-
enhead,
Then had he damned²⁵ wedding
out of dread²⁶;
And certes, if there were no seed y-
sow²⁷,
Virginitie then whereof should it
grow?
Paul durste not commanden, at the
least,
A thing of which his Master gave
no hest²⁸.

²⁵condemned.

²⁶doubt.

²⁷sown.

²⁸command.

THE PROLOGUE

The dart²⁹ is set up for virginity;
(*Note 6*)

Catch whoso may, who runneth
best let see.

But this word is not ta'en of every
wight,

But there as³⁰ God will give it of
his might.

I wot well that th' apostle was a
maid,

But natheless, although he wrote
and said,

He would that every wight were
such as he,

All is but counsel to virginity.

And, since to be a wife he gave me

²⁹goal.

³⁰except where.

leave
Of indulgence, so is it no reprove³¹
To wedde me, if that my make³²
should die,
Without exception³³ of bigamy;
All were it³⁴ good no woman for to
touch
(He meant as in his bed or in his
couch),
For peril is both fire and tow
t'assemble
Ye know what this example may
resemble.
This is all and some, he held virgin-

³¹scandal, reproach.

³²mate, husband.

³³charge, reproach.

³⁴though it might be.

THE PROLOGUE

ity
More profit than wedding in
frailty:
(Frailty clepe I, but if³⁵ that he and
she
Would lead their lives all in
chastity),
I grant it well, I have of none envy
Who maidenhead prefer to
bigamy;
It liketh them t' be clean in body
and ghost³⁶;
Of mine estate³⁷ I will not make a
boast.
For, well ye know, a lord in his

³⁵frailty I call it, unless.

³⁶soul.

³⁷condition.

THE PROLOGUE

household
Hath not every vessel all of gold;
(*Note 7*)
Some are of tree, and do their lord
service.
God calleth folk to him in sundry
wise,
And each one hath of God a proper
gift,
Some this, some that, as liketh him
to shift³⁸.
Virginitie is great perfection,
And continence eke with devotion:
But Christ, that of perfection is the
well³⁹,
Bade not every wight he should go

³⁸appoint, distribute.

³⁹fountain.

THE PROLOGUE

sell
All that he had, and give it to the
poor,
And in such wise follow him and
his lore⁴⁰:
He spake to them that would live
perfectly, –
And, lordings, by your leave, that
am not I;
I will bestow the flower of mine
age
In th' acts and in the fruits of mar-
riage.
Tell me also, to what conclusion⁴¹
Were members made of genera-
tion,

⁴⁰doctrine.

⁴¹end, purpose.

THE PROLOGUE

And of so perfect wise a wight⁴² y-
wrought?

Trust me right well, they were not
made for nought.

Glose whoso will, and say both up
and down,

That they were made for the pur-
gatioun

Of urine, and of other thinges
smale,

And eke to know a female from a
male:

And for none other cause? say ye
no?

Experience wot well it is not so.

So that the clerkes⁴³ be not with me

⁴²being.

⁴³scholars.

wroth,
I say this, that they were made for
both,
That is to say, for office, and for
ease⁴⁴
Of engendrure, there we God not
displease.
Why should men elles in their
bookes set,
That man shall yield unto his wife
her debt?
Now wherewith should he make
his payement,
If he us'd not his silly instrument?
Then were they made upon a crea-
ture
To purge urine, and eke for engen-

⁴⁴for duty and for pleasure.

drure.

But I say not that every wight is
hold⁴⁵,

That hath such harness⁴⁶ as I to
you told

To go and use them in engendrure;
Then should men take of chastity
no cure⁴⁷.

Christ was a maid, and shapen⁴⁸ as
a man,

And many a saint, since that this
world began,

Yet ever liv'd in perfect chastity.

⁴⁵obliged.

⁴⁶equipment.

⁴⁷care.

⁴⁸.

THE PROLOGUE

I will not vie⁴⁹ with no virginity.
Let them with bread of pured⁵⁰
wheat be fed,
And let us wives eat our barley
bread.
And yet with barley bread, Mark
tell us can, (*Note 8*)
Our Lord Jesus refreshed many a
man.
In such estate as God hath cleped
us⁵¹,
I'll persevere, I am not precious⁵²,
In wifhood I will use mine instru-
ment

⁴⁹contend.

⁵⁰purified.

⁵¹called us to.

⁵²over-dainty.

THE PROLOGUE

As freely as my Maker hath it sent.
If I be dangerous⁵³ God give me
sorrow;
Mine husband shall it have, both
eve and morrow,
When that him list come forth and
pay his debt.
A husband will I have, I will no
let⁵⁴,
Which shall be both my debtor and
my thrall⁵⁵,
And have his tribulation withal
Upon his flesh, while that I am his
wife.
I have the power during all my life

⁵³sparing of my favours.

⁵⁴will bear no hindrance.

⁵⁵slave.

THE PROLOGUE

Upon his proper body, and not he;
Right thus th' apostle told it unto
me,
And bade our husbands for to love
us well;
All this sentence me liketh every
deal⁵⁶.

Up start the Pardoner, and that
anon;
"Now, Dame," quoth he, "by God
and by Saint John,
Ye are a noble preacher in this case.
I was about to wed a wife, alas!
What? should I bie⁵⁷ it on my flesh
so dear?"

⁵⁶whit.

⁵⁷suffer for.

THE PROLOGUE

Yet had I lever⁵⁸ wed no wife this
year."

"Abide⁵⁹," quoth she; "my tale is
not begun

Nay, thou shalt drinken of another
tun

Ere that I go, shall savour worse
than ale.

And when that I have told thee
forth my tale

Of tribulation in marriage,

Of which I am expert in all mine
age,

(This is to say, myself hath been the
whip),

Then mayest thou choose whether

⁵⁸rather.

⁵⁹wait in patience.

thou wilt sip
Of thilke tunne⁶⁰, that I now shall
broach.
Beware of it, ere thou too nigh ap-
proach,
For I shall tell examples more than
ten:
Whoso will not beware by other
men,
By him shall other men corrected
be:
These same wordes writeth
Ptolemy;
Read in his Almagest, and take it
there."
"Dame, I would pray you, if your
will it were,"

⁶⁰that tun.

THE PROLOGUE

Saide this Pardoner, "as ye began,
Tell forth your tale, and spare for
no man,
And teach us younge men of your
practique."

"Gladly," quoth she, "since that it
may you like.

But that I pray to all this company,
If that I speak after my fantasy,
To take nought agrief⁶¹ what I may
say;

For mine intent is only for to play.

Now, Sirs, then will I tell you forth
my tale.

As ever may I drinke wine or ale
I shall say sooth; the husbands that
I had

⁶¹to heart.

THE PROLOGUE

Three of them were good, and two
were bad
The three were goode men, and
rich, and old
Unnethes mighte they the statute
hold⁶²
In which that they were bounden
unto me.
Yet wot well what I mean of this,
pardie⁶³.
As God me help, I laugh when that
I think
How piteously at night I made
them swink⁶⁴,
But, by my fay, I told of it no

⁶²they could with difficulty obey the law.

⁶³by God.

⁶⁴labour.

THE PROLOGUE

store⁶⁵:

They had me giv'n their land and
their treasure,

Me needed not do longer diligence
To win their love, or do them reverence.

They loved me so well, by God
above,

That I tolde no dainty⁶⁶ of their
love.

A wise woman will busy her ever-
in-one⁶⁷

To get their love, where that she
hath none.

But, since I had them wholly in my

⁶⁵by my faith, I held it of no account.

⁶⁶cared nothing for.

⁶⁷constantly.

THE PROLOGUE

hand,
And that they had me given all
their land,
Why should I take keep⁶⁸ them for
to please,
But⁶⁹ it were for my profit, or mine
ease?
I set them so a-worke, by my fay,
That many a night they sange,
well-away!
The bacon was not fetched for
them, I trow,
That some men have in Essex at
Dunmow. (*Note 9*)
I govern'd them so well after my
law,

⁶⁸care.

⁶⁹unless.

THE PROLOGUE

That each of them full blissful was
and fawe⁷⁰

To bringe me gay thinges from the
fair.

They were full glad when that I
spake them fair,

For, God it wot, I chid them spi-
teously⁷¹.

Now hearken how I bare me prop-
erly.

Ye wise wives, that can under-
stand,

Thus should ye speak, and bear
them wrong on hand⁷²,

For half so boldely can there no

⁷⁰fain.

⁷¹rebuked them angrily.

⁷²make them believe falsely.

THE PROLOGUE

man
Swearn and lien as a woman can.
(I say not this by wives that be
wise,
But if⁷³ it be when they them mis-
advise⁷⁴.)
A wise wife, if that she can⁷⁵ her
good,
Shall beare them on hand⁷⁶ the
cow is wood,
And take witness of her owen maid
Of their assent: but hearken how I
said.
"Sir olde kaynard, (*Note 10*) is this

⁷³unless.

⁷⁴act unadvisedly.

⁷⁵knows.

⁷⁶make them believe.

THE PROLOGUE

thine array?
Why is my neigheboure's wife so
gay?
She is honour'd over all where⁷⁷
she go'th,
I sit at home, I have no thrifty
cloth⁷⁸.
What dost thou at my neighe-
boure's house?
Is she so fair? art thou so amorous?
What rown'st⁷⁹ thou with our
maid? benedicite,
Sir olde lechour, let thy japes⁸⁰ be.
And if I have a gossip, or a friend

⁷⁷wheresoever.

⁷⁸good clothes.

⁷⁹whisperest.

⁸⁰tricks.

(Withoute guilt), thou chidest as a
fiend,

If that I walk or play unto his
house.

Thou comest home as drunken as a
mouse,

And preachest on thy bench, with
evil prefe⁸¹:

Thou say'st to me, it is a great mis-
chief

To wed a poore woman, for
costage⁸²:

And if that she be rich, of high par-
age⁸³; (*Note 11*)

Then say'st thou, that it is a tor-

⁸¹proof.

⁸²expense.

⁸³birth.

mentry
To suffer her pride and melancholy.
And if that she be fair, thou very
knave,
Thou say'st that every honour⁸⁴
will her have;
She may no while in chastity abide,
That is assailed upon every side.
Thou say'st some folk desire us for
richness,
Some for our shape, and some for
our fairness,
And some, for she can either sing
or dance,
And some for gentleness and dal-
liance,
Some for her hands and her armes

⁸⁴whoremonger.

smale:

Thus goes all to the devil, by thy
tale;

Thou say'st, men may not keep a
castle wall

That may be so assailed over all⁸⁵.

And if that she be foul, thou say'st
that she

Coveteth every man that she may
see;

For as a spaniel she will on him
leap,

Till she may finde some man her to
cheap⁸⁶;

And none so grey goose goes there
in the lake,

⁸⁵everywhere.

⁸⁶buy.

THE PROLOGUE

(So say'st thou) that will be without a make⁸⁷.

And say'st, it is a hard thing for to weld⁸⁸

A thing that no man will, his thanks, held⁸⁹.

Thus say'st thou, lorel⁹⁰, when thou go'st to bed,

And that no wise man needeth for to wed,

Nor no man that intendeth unto heaven.

With wilde thunder dint⁹¹ and

⁸⁷mate.

⁸⁸wield, govern.

⁸⁹hold with his goodwill.

⁹⁰good-for-nothing.

⁹¹stroke.

fiery leven⁹²

Mote⁹³ thy wicked necke be to-
broke.

Thou say'st, that dropping houses,
and eke smoke,

And chiding wives, make men to
flee

Out of their owne house; ah!
ben'dicite,

What aileth such an old man for to
chide?

Thou say'st, we wives will our
vices hide,

Till we be fast@wedded.@@, and
then we will them shew.

Well may that be a proverb of a

⁹²lightning.

⁹³may.

THE PROLOGUE

shrew⁹⁴.

Thou say'st, that oxen, asses,
horses, hounds,
They be assayed at diverse
stounds⁹⁵,
Basons and lavers, ere that men
them buy,
Spoones, stooles, and all such hus-
bandry,
And so be pots, and clothes, and
array⁹⁶,
But folk of wives make none assay,
Till they be wedded, – olde dotard
shrew! –
And then, say'st thou, we will our

⁹⁴ill-tempered wretch.

⁹⁵tested at various seasons.

⁹⁶raiment.

vices shew.
Thou say'st also, that it displeaseth
me,
But if⁹⁷ that thou wilt praise my
beauty,
And but⁹⁸ thou pore alway upon
my face,
And call me faire dame in every
place;
And but⁹⁹ thou make a feast on
thilke¹⁰⁰ day
That I was born, and make me
fresh and gay;

⁹⁷unless.

⁹⁸unless.

⁹⁹unless.

¹⁰⁰that.

THE PROLOGUE

And but thou do to my norice¹⁰¹
honour, (*Note 12*)
And to my chamberere¹⁰² within
my bow'r,
And to my father's folk, and mine
allies¹⁰³;
Thus sayest thou, old barrel full of
lies.
And yet also of our prentice Jenkin,
For his crisp hair, shining as gold
so fine,
And for he squireth me both up
and down,
Yet hast thou caught a false suspi-
cioun:

¹⁰¹nurse.

¹⁰²chamber-maid.

¹⁰³relations.

THE PROLOGUE

I will him not, though thou wert
dead to-morrow.

But tell me this, why hidest thou,
with sorrow¹⁰⁴,

The keyes of thy chest away from
me?

It is my good¹⁰⁵ as well as thine,
pardie.

What, think'st to make an idiot of
our dame?

Now, by that lord that called is
Saint Jame,

Thou shalt not both, although that
thou wert wood¹⁰⁶,

Be master of my body, and my

¹⁰⁴sorrow on thee!

¹⁰⁵property.

¹⁰⁶furious.

THE PROLOGUE

good¹⁰⁷,
The one thou shalt forego, mau-
gre¹⁰⁸ thine eyen.
What helpeth it of me t'inquire and
spyen?
I trow thou wouldest lock me in
thy chest.
Thou shouldest say, 'Fair wife, go
where thee lest;
Take your disport; I will believe no
tales;
I know you for a true wife, Dame
Ales¹⁰⁹.'
We love no man, that taketh

¹⁰⁷property.

¹⁰⁸in spite of.

¹⁰⁹Alice.

keep¹¹⁰ or charge
Where that we go; we will be at our
large.
Of alle men most blessed may he
be,
The wise astrologer Dan¹¹¹
Ptolemy,
That saith this proverb in his Al-
magest: (*Note 13*)
'Of alle men his wisdom is highest,
That recketh not who hath the
world in hand.
By this proverb thou shalt well un-
derstand,
Have thou enough, what thar¹¹²

¹¹⁰care.

¹¹¹Lord.

¹¹²needs, behoves.

THE PROLOGUE

thee reck or care
How merrily that other folkes fare?
For certes, olde dotard, by your
leave,
Ye shall have (pleasure) (*Note 14*)
right enough at eve.
He is too great a niggard that will
werne¹¹³
A man to light a candle at his
lantern;
He shall have never the less light,
pardie.
Have thou enough, thee thar¹¹⁴
not plaine¹¹⁵ thee
Thou say'st also, if that we make us

¹¹³forbid.

¹¹⁴need.

¹¹⁵complain.

gay
With clothing and with precious
array,
That it is peril of our chastity.
And yet, – with sorrow! – thou en-
forcest thee,
And say'st these words in the apos-
tle's name:
'In habit made with chastity and
shame¹¹⁶
Ye women shall apparel you,'
quoth he, (*Note 15*)
'And not in tressed hair and gay
perrie¹¹⁷,
As pearles, nor with gold, nor
clothes rich.'

¹¹⁶modesty.

¹¹⁷jewels.

After thy text nor after thy rubrich
I will not work as muchel as a gnat.
Thou say'st also, I walk out like a
 cat;
For whoso woulde singe the catte's
 skin
Then will the catte well dwell in
 her inn¹¹⁸;
And if the catte's skin be sleek and
 gay,
She will not dwell in house half a
 day,
But forth she will, ere any day be
 daw'd,
To shew her skin, and go a cater-
 waw'd¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁸house.

¹¹⁹caterwauling.

THE PROLOGUE

This is to say, if I be gay, sir shrew,
I will run out, my borel¹²⁰ for to
shew.

Sir olde fool, what helpeth thee to
spyen?

Though thou pray Argus with his
hundred eyen

To be my wardecorps¹²¹, as he can
best

In faith he shall not keep me, but
me lest¹²²:

Yet could I make his beard¹²³, so
may I the.

"Thou sayest eke, that there be

¹²⁰apparel, fine clothes.

¹²¹body-guard.

¹²²unless I please.

¹²³make a jest of him.

THE PROLOGUE

things three¹²⁴,
Which thinges greatly trouble all
this earth,
And that no wighte may endure
the ferth¹²⁵:
O lefe¹²⁶ sir shrew, may Jesus
short¹²⁷ thy life.
Yet preachest thou, and say'st, a
hateful wife
Y-reckon'd is for one of these mis-
chances.
Be there none other manner resem-
blances¹²⁸

¹²⁴thrive.

¹²⁵fourth.

¹²⁶pleasant.

¹²⁷shorten.

¹²⁸no other kind of comparison.

THE PROLOGUE

That ye may liken your parables
unto,
But if a silly wife be one of tho¹²⁹?
Thou likenest a woman's love to
hell;
To barren land where water may
not dwell.
Thou likenest it also to wild fire;
The more it burns, the more it hath
desire
To consume every thing that burnt
will be.
Thou sayest, right as wormes
shend¹³⁰ a tree,
Right so a wife destroyeth her hus-
bond;

¹²⁹those.

¹³⁰destroy.

THE PROLOGUE

This know they well that be to
wives bond."
Lordings, right thus, as ye have un-
derstand,
Bare I stiffly mine old husbands on
hand¹³¹,
That thus they saiden in their
drunkenness;
And all was false, but that I took
witness
On Jenkin, and upon my niece also.
O Lord! the pain I did them, and
the woe,
'Full guileless, by Godde's sweete
pine¹³²;
For as a horse I coulde bite and

¹³¹made them believe.

¹³²pain.

whine;
I coulde plain¹³³, an'¹³⁴ I was in
the guilt,
Or elles oftentime I had been
spilt¹³⁵
Whoso first cometh to the nill, first
grint¹³⁶;
I plained first, so was our war y-
stint¹³⁷.
They were full glad to excuse them
full blive¹³⁸
Of things that they never aguilt

¹³³complain.

¹³⁴even though.

¹³⁵ruined.

¹³⁶is ground.

¹³⁷stopped.

¹³⁸quickly.

THE PROLOGUE

their live¹³⁹.

"Thou sayest eke, that there be
thinges three¹⁴⁰

Which thinges greatly trouble all
this earth,

And that no wighte may endure
the ferth¹⁴¹:

O lefe¹⁴² sir shrew, may Jesus
short¹⁴³ thy life.

Yet preachest thou, and say'st, a
hateful wife

Y-reckon'd is for one of these mis-
chances.

¹³⁹were guilty in their lives.

¹⁴⁰thrive.

¹⁴¹fourth.

¹⁴²pleasant.

¹⁴³shorten.

THE PROLOGUE

Be there none other manner resemblances¹⁴⁴
That ye may liken your parables unto,
But if a silly wife be one of tho¹⁴⁵?
Thou likenest a woman's love to hell;
To barren land where water may not dwell.
Thou likenest it also to wild fire;
The more it burns, the more it hath desire
To consume every thing that burnt will be.
Thou sayest, right as wormes

¹⁴⁴no other kind of comparison.

¹⁴⁵those.

shend¹⁴⁶ a tree,
Right so a wife destroyeth her husband;
This know they well that be to wives bond."
Lordings, right thus, as ye have understand,
Bare I stiffly mine old husbands on hand¹⁴⁷,
That thus they saiden in their drunkenness;
And all was false, but that I took witness
On Jenkin, and upon my niece also.
O Lord! the pain I did them, and the woe,

¹⁴⁶destroy.

¹⁴⁷made them believe.

'Full guilteless, by Godde's sweete
 pine¹⁴⁸;
 For as a horse I coulde bite and
 whine;
 I coulde plain¹⁴⁹, an'¹⁵⁰ I was in
 the guilt,
 Or elles oftentime I had been
 spilt¹⁵¹
 Whoso first cometh to the nill, first
 grint¹⁵²;
 I plained first, so was our war y-
 stint¹⁵³.

¹⁴⁸pain.

¹⁴⁹complain.

¹⁵⁰even though.

¹⁵¹ruined.

¹⁵²is ground.

¹⁵³stopped.

THE PROLOGUE

They were full glad to excuse them
full blive¹⁵⁴
Of things that they never aguilt
their live¹⁵⁵.
Of wenches would I beare them on
hand¹⁵⁶,
When that for sickness scarcely
might they stand,
Yet tickled I his hearte for that he
Ween'd¹⁵⁷ that I had of him so
great cherte¹⁵⁸, (*Note 16*)
I swore that all my walking out by
night

¹⁵⁴quickly.

¹⁵⁵were guilty in their lives.

¹⁵⁶falsely accuse them.

¹⁵⁷though.

¹⁵⁸affection.

Was for to espy wenches that he
dight¹⁵⁹:

Under that colour had I many a
mirth.

For all such wit is given us at birth;
Deceit, weeping, and spinning,
God doth give

To women kindly, while that they
may live¹⁶⁰.

And thus of one thing I may vaunte
me,

At th' end I had the better in each
degree,

By sleight, or force, or by some
manner thing,

As by continual murmur or grudg-

¹⁵⁹adorned.

¹⁶⁰naturally.

ing¹⁶¹,
Namely¹⁶² a-bed, there hadde they
mischance,
There would I chide, and do them
no pleasance:
I would no longer in the bed abide,
If that I felt his arm over my side,
Till he had made his ransom unto
me,
Then would I suffer him do his
nicety¹⁶³. (*Note 17*)
And therefore every man this tale I
tell,
Win whoso may, for all is for to sell;
With empty hand men may no

¹⁶¹complaining.

¹⁶²especially.

¹⁶³folly.

hawkes lure;
For winning would I all his will endure,
And make me a feigned appetite,
And yet in bacon¹⁶⁴ had I never
delight (*Note 9*)
That made me that I ever would
them chide.
For, though the Pope had sitten
them beside,
I would not spare them at their
owen board,
For, by my troth, I quit¹⁶⁵ them
word for word
As help me very God omnipotent,
Though I right now should make

¹⁶⁴i.e. of Dunmow.

¹⁶⁵repaid.

my testament
I owe them not a word, that is not
quit¹⁶⁶
I brought it so aboute by my wit,
That they must give it up, as for the
best
Or elles had we never been in rest.
For, though he looked as a wood¹⁶⁷
lion,
Yet should he fail of his conclusion.
Then would I say, "Now, goode
lefe¹⁶⁸ tak keep¹⁶⁹
How meekly looketh Wilken oure
sheep!

¹⁶⁶repaid.

¹⁶⁷furious.

¹⁶⁸dear.

¹⁶⁹heed.

Come near, my spouse, and let me
ba¹⁷⁰ thy cheek (*Note 18*)
Ye shoulde be all patient and meek,
And have a sweet y-spiced¹⁷¹ con-
science,
Since ye so preach of Jobe's pa-
tience.
Suffer alway, since ye so well can
preach,
And but ye do, certain we shall you
teach¹⁷²
That it is fair to have a wife in
peace.
One of us two must bowe¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰kiss.

¹⁷¹tender, nice.

¹⁷²unless.

¹⁷³give way.

THE PROLOGUE

doubteless:
And since a man is more reason-
able
Than woman is, ye must be
suff' rable.
What aileth you to grudge¹⁷⁴ thus
and groan?
Is it for ye would have my (love)
(*Note 14*) alone?
Why, take it all: lo, have it every
deal¹⁷⁵,
Peter! (*Note 19*) shrew¹⁷⁶ you but
ye love it well
For if I woulde sell my belle

¹⁷⁴complain.

¹⁷⁵whit.

¹⁷⁶curse.

THE PROLOGUE

chose¹⁷⁷,
I coulde walk as fresh as is a rose,
But I will keep it for your owen
tooth.
Ye be to blame, by God, I say you
sooth."
Such manner wordes hadde we on
hand.
Now will I speaken of my fourth
husband.
My fourthe husband was a revel-
lour;
This is to say, he had a paramour,
And I was young and full of
ragerie¹⁷⁸,
Stubborn and strong, and jolly as a

¹⁷⁷beautiful thing.

¹⁷⁸wantonness.

THE PROLOGUE

pie¹⁷⁹.

Then could I dance to a harpe
smale,

And sing, y-wis¹⁸⁰, as any nightin-
gale,

When I had drunk a draught of
sweete wine.

Metellius, the foule churl, the
swine,

That with a staff bereft his wife of
life

For she drank wine, though I had
been his wife,

Never should he have daunted me
from drink:

And, after wine, of Venus most I

¹⁷⁹magpie.

¹⁸⁰certainly.

think.

For all so sure as cold engenders
hail,

A liquorish mouth must have a
liquorish tail.

In woman vinolent¹⁸¹ is no de-
fence¹⁸²,

This knowe lechours by experi-
ence.

But, lord Christ, when that it re-
memb'reth me

Upon my youth, and on my jollity,
It tickleth me about mine hearte-
root;

Unto this day it doth mine hearte

¹⁸¹full of wine.

¹⁸²resistance.

boot¹⁸³,
That I have had my world as in my
time.
But age, alas! that all will enven-
ime¹⁸⁴,
Hath me bereft my beauty and my
pith¹⁸⁵:
Let go; farewell; the devil go there-
with.
The flour is gon, there is no more to
tell,
The bran, as I best may, now must
I sell.
But yet to be right merry will I

¹⁸³good.

¹⁸⁴poison, embitter.

¹⁸⁵vigour.

THE PROLOGUE

fand¹⁸⁶.

Now forth to tell you of my fourth
husband,

I say, I in my heart had great de-
spite,

That he of any other had delight;

But he was quit¹⁸⁷, by God and by
Saint Joce: (*Note 21*)

I made for him of the same wood a
cross;

Not of my body in no foul man-
nere,

But certainly I made folk such
cheer,

That in his owen grease I made him
fry

¹⁸⁶try.

¹⁸⁷requited, paid back.

THE PROLOGUE

For anger, and for very jealousy.
By God, in earth I was his purgatory,
For which I hope his soul may be
in glory.
For, God it wot, he sat full oft and
sung,
When that his shoe full bitterly him
wrung¹⁸⁸.
There was no wight, save God and
he, that wist
In many wise how sore I did him
twist. (*Note 20*)
He died when I came from
Jerusalem,
And lies in grave under the roode

¹⁸⁸pinched.

THE PROLOGUE

beam¹⁸⁹:

Although his tomb is not so curious

As was the sepulchre of Darius,
Which that Apelles wrought so
subtly.

It is but waste to bury them
preciously.

Let him fare well, God give his
soule rest,

He is now in his grave and in his
chest.

Now of my fifthe husband will I
tell:

God let his soul never come into
hell.

And yet was he to me the moste

¹⁸⁹cross.

THE PROLOGUE

shrew¹⁹⁰;
That feel I on my ribbes all by
rew¹⁹¹,
And ever shall, until mine ending
day.
But in our bed he was so fresh and
gay,
And therewithal so well he could
me glose¹⁹²,
When that he woulde have my
belle chose,
Though he had beaten me on every
bone,
Yet could he win again my love
anon.

¹⁹⁰cruel, ill-tempered.

¹⁹¹in a row.

¹⁹²flatter.

THE PROLOGUE

I trow, I lov'd him better, for that he
Was of his love so dangerous¹⁹³ to
me.

We women have, if that I shall not
lie,

In this matter a quaint fantasy.

Whatever thing we may not lightly
have,

Thereafter will we cry all day and
crave.

Forbid us thing, and that desire we;
Press on us fast, and thenne will we
flee.

With danger¹⁹⁴ utter we all our
chaffare¹⁹⁵;

¹⁹³sparing, difficult.

¹⁹⁴difficulty.

¹⁹⁵merchandise.

THE PROLOGUE

Great press at market maketh
deare ware,
And too great cheap is held at little
price;
This knoweth every woman that is
wise.
My fifthe husband, God his soule
bless,
Which that I took for love and no
richess,
He some time was a clerk of Oxen-
ford¹⁹⁶,
And had left school, and went at
home to board
With my gossip¹⁹⁷, dwelling in
oure town:

¹⁹⁶a scholar of Oxford.

¹⁹⁷godmother.

THE PROLOGUE

God have her soul, her name was
Alisoun.

She knew my heart, and all my
privity,

Bet than our parish priest, so may I
the¹⁹⁸.

To her betrayed I my counsel all;
For had my husband pissed on a
wall,

Or done a thing that should have
cost his life,

To her, and to another worthy wife,
And to my niece, which that I
loved well,

I would have told his counsel every
deal¹⁹⁹.

¹⁹⁸thrive.

¹⁹⁹jot.

THE PROLOGUE

And so I did full often, God it wot,
That made his face full often red
and hot

For very shame, and blam'd him-
self, for he

Had told to me so great a priv-
ity²⁰⁰.

And so befell that ones in a Lent
(So oftentimes I to my gossip went,
For ever yet I loved to be gay,
And for to walk in March, April,
and May

From house to house, to heare
sundry tales),

That Jenkin clerk, and my gossip,
Dame Ales,

And I myself, into the fieldes went.

²⁰⁰secret.

Mine husband was at London all
that Lent;
I had the better leisure for to play,
And for to see, and eke for to be
sey²⁰¹
Of lusty folk; what wist I where my
grace²⁰²
Was shapen for to be, or in what
place²⁰³?
Therefore made I my visitations
To vigilies²⁰⁴, and to processions,
(*Note 22*)
To preachings eke, and to these pil-
grimages,

²⁰¹seen.

²⁰²favour.

²⁰³appointed,

²⁰⁴festival-eves.

THE PROLOGUE

To plays of miracles, and marriages,
And weared upon me gay scarlet
gites²⁰⁵.

These wormes, nor these mothes,
nor these mites
On my apparel frett²⁰⁶ them never
a deal²⁰⁷

And know'st thou why? for they
were used²⁰⁸ well.

Now will I telle forth what hap-
pen'd me:

I say, that in the fieldes walked we,
Till truely we had such dalliance,

²⁰⁵gowns.

²⁰⁶fed.

²⁰⁷whit.

²⁰⁸worn.

THE PROLOGUE

This clerk and I, that of my pur-
veyance²⁰⁹

I spake to him, and told him how
that he,

If I were widow, shoulde wedde
me.

For certainly, I say for no
bobance²¹⁰, (*Note 23*)

Yet was I never without pur-
veyance²¹¹

Of marriage, nor of other thinges
eke:

I hold a mouse's wit not worth a
leek,

That hath but one hole for to

²⁰⁹ foresight.

²¹⁰ boasting.

²¹¹ foresight.

starte²¹² to, (*Note 24*)
And if that faile, then is all y-do²¹³.
(I bare him on hand²¹⁴ he had en-
chanted me.
My dame taughte me that subtilty);
And eke I said, I mette²¹⁵ of him all
night,
He would have slain me, as I lay
upright,
And all my bed was full of very
blood;
But yet I hop'd that he should do
me good;
For blood betoken'd gold, as me

²¹²es cape.

²¹³done.

²¹⁴falsely assured him.

²¹⁵dreamed.

THE PROLOGUE

was taught.
And all was false, I dream'd of him
right naught,
But as I follow'd aye my dame's
lore,
As well of that as of other things
more.) (*Note 25*)
But now, sir, let me see, what shall
I sayn?
Aha! by God, I have my tale again.
When that my fourthe husband
was on bier,
I wept algate²¹⁶ and made a sorry
cheer²¹⁷,
As wives must, for it is the usage;
And with my kerchief covered my

²¹⁶always.

²¹⁷countenance.

THE PROLOGUE

visage;
But, for I was provided with a
make²¹⁸,
I wept but little, that I undertake²¹⁹
To churche was mine husband
borne a-morrow
With neigheours that for him
made sorrow,
And Jenkin, oure clerk, was one of
tho²²⁰:
As help me God, when that I saw
him go
After the bier, methought he had a
pair
Of legges and of feet so clean and

²¹⁸mate.

²¹⁹promise.

²²⁰those.

THE PROLOGUE

fair,
That all my heart I gave unto his
hold²²¹.
He was, I trow, a twenty winter
old,
And I was forty, if I shall say sooth,
But yet I had always a colte's tooth.
Gat-toothed I was, and that be-
came me well, (*Note 26*)
I had the print of Sainte Venus'
seal.
(As help me God, I was a lusty one,
And fair, and rich, and young, and
well begone²²²:
For certes I am all venerian²²³

²²¹keeping.

²²²in a good way,

²²³under the influence of Venus.

THE PROLOGUE

In feeling, and my heart is mar-
tian²²⁴;
Venus me gave my lust and liquor-
ishness,
And Mars gave me my sturdy har-
diness.) (*Note 25*)
Mine ascendant was Taure²²⁵, and
Mars therein:
Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
I follow'd aye mine inclination
By virtue of my constellation:
That made me that I coulde not
withdraw
My chamber of Venus from a good
fellow.
(Yet have I Marte's mark upon my

²²⁴under the influence of Mars.

²²⁵Taurus.

THE PROLOGUE

face,
And also in another privy place.
For God so wisly²²⁶ be my salva-
tion,
I loved never by discretion,
But ever follow'd mine own ap-
petite,
All²²⁷ were he short, or long, or
black, or white,
I took no keep²²⁸, so that he liked
me,
How poor he was, neither of what
degree.) (*Note 25*)
What should I say? but that at the
month's end

²²⁶certainly.

²²⁷whether.

²²⁸heed.

This jolly clerk Jenkin, that was so
hend²²⁹,
Had wedded me with great solemnity,
And to him gave I all the land and fee
That ever was me given therebefore:
But afterward repented me full sore.
He woulde suffer nothing of my list²³⁰.
By God, he smote me ones with his fist,
For that I rent out of his book a leaf,
That of the stroke mine eare wax'd

²²⁹courteous.

²³⁰pleasure.

all deaf.
Stubborn I was, as is a lioness,
And of my tongue a very jangler-
ess²³¹,
And walk I would, as I had done
beforn,
From house to house, although he
had it sworn²³²:
For which he oftentimes woulde
preach
And me of olde Roman gestes²³³
teach
How that Sulpitius Gallus left his
wife
And her forsook for term of all his

²³¹prater.

²³²had sworn to prevent it.

²³³stories.

THE PROLOGUE

For nought but open-headed²³⁴ he
her say²³⁵
Looking out at his door upon a day.
Another Roman (*Note 27*) told he
me by name,
That, for his wife was at a summer
game
Without his knowing, he forsook
her eke.
And then would he upon his Bible
seek
That ilke²³⁶ proverb of Ecclesiast,
Where he commandeth, and for-
biddeth fast,
Man shall not suffer his wife go roll

²³⁴bare-headed.

²³⁵saw.

²³⁶same.

about.

Then would he say right thus with-
oute doubt:

"Whoso that buildeth his house all
of sallo²³⁷,

And pricketh his blind horse over
the fallows,

And suff'reth his wife to go seeke
hallo²³⁸,

Is worthy to be hanged on the gal-
lows."

But all for nought; I sette not a
haw²³⁹

Of his proverbs, nor of his olde
saw;

²³⁷ willows.

²³⁸ make pilgrimages.

²³⁹ cared nothing for.

THE PROLOGUE

Nor would I not of him corrected
be.

I hate them that my vices telle me,
And so do more of us (God wot)
than I.

This made him wood²⁴⁰ with me
all utterly;

I woulde not forbear²⁴¹ him in no
case.

Now will I say you sooth, by Saint
Thomas,

Why that I rent out of his book a
leaf,

For which he smote me, so that I
was deaf.

He had a book, that gladly night

²⁴⁰ furious.

²⁴¹ endure.

and day
For his disport he would it read al-
way;
He call'd it Valerie, (*Note 28*) and
Theophrast,
And with that book he laugh'd al-
way full fast.
And eke there was a clerk some-
time at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Saint
Jerome,
That made a book against Jovinian,
Which book was there; and eke
Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise,
That was an abbess not far from
Paris;

And eke the Parables²⁴² of
Solomon,
Ovide's Art, (*Note 29*) and bour-
des²⁴³ many one;
And alle these were bound in one
volume.
And every night and day was his
custume
(When he had leisure and vacation
From other worldly occupation)
To readen in this book of wicked
wives.
He knew of them more legends
and more lives
Than be of goodde wives in the
Bible.

²⁴²Proverbs.

²⁴³jests.

THE PROLOGUE

For, trust me well, it is an impossible
That any clerk will speake good of
wives,
(But if²⁴⁴ it be of holy saintes' lives)
Nor of none other woman never
the mo'.
Who painted the lion, tell it me,
who?
By God, if women haddde written
stories,
As clerkes have within their orato-
ries,
They would have writ of men more
wickedness
Than all the mark of Adam (*Note*
30) may redress

²⁴⁴unless.

THE PROLOGUE

The children of Mercury and of
Venus, (*Note 31*)

Be in their working full contrari-
ous.

Mercury loveth wisdom and sci-
ence,

And Venus loveth riot and dis-
pence²⁴⁵.

And for their diverse disposition,
Each falls in other's exaltation.

As thus, God wot, Mercury is des-
olate

In Pisces, where Venus is exaltate,
And Venus falls where Mercury is
raised. (*Note 32*)

Therefore no woman by no clerk is
praised.

²⁴⁵extravagance.

THE PROLOGUE

The clerk, when he is old, and may
not do
Of Venus' works not worth his olde
shoe,
Then sits he down, and writes in
his dotage,
That women cannot keep their
marriage.
But now to purpose, why I tolde
thee
That I was beaten for a book, par-
die.

Upon a night Jenkin, that was our
sire²⁴⁶,
Read on his book, as he sat by the
fire,

²⁴⁶goodman.

THE PROLOGUE

Of Eva first, that for her wicked-
ness
Was all mankind brought into
wretchedness,
For which that Jesus Christ himself
was slain,
That bought us with his hearte-
blood again.
Lo here express of women may ye
find
That woman was the loss of all
mankind.
Then read he me how Samson lost
his hairs
Sleeping, his leman cut them with
her shears,
Through whiche treason lost he
both his eyen.
Then read he me, if that I shall not

THE PROLOGUE

lien,
Of Hercules, and of his Dejanire,
That caused him to set himself on
fire.
Nothing forgot he of the care and
woe
That Socrates had with his wives
two;
How Xantippe cast piss upon his
head.
This silly man sat still, as he were
dead,
He wip'd his head, and no more
durst he sayn,
But, "Ere the thunder stint²⁴⁷ there
cometh rain."
Of Phasiphae, that was queen of

²⁴⁷ ceases.

THE PROLOGUE

Crete,
For shrewedness²⁴⁸ he thought the
tale sweet.
Fy, speak no more, it is a grisly
thing,
Of her horrible lust and her liking.
Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery
That falsely made her husband for
to die,
He read it with full good devotion.
He told me eke, for what occasion
Amphiorax at Thebes lost his life:
My husband had a legend of his
wife
Eryphile, that for an ouche²⁴⁹ of
gold

²⁴⁸wickedness.

²⁴⁹clasp, collar.

THE PROLOGUE

Had privily unto the Greekes told,
Where that her husband hid him in
 a place,
For which he had at Thebes sorry
 grace.
Of Luna told he me, and of Lucie;
They bothe made their husbands
 for to die,
That one for love, that other was
 for hate.
Luna her husband on an ev'ning
 late
Empoison'd had, for that she was
 his foe:
Lucia liquorish lov'd her husband
 so,
That, for he should always upon
 her think,

THE PROLOGUE

She gave him such a manner²⁵⁰
love-drink,
That he was dead before it were the
morrow:
And thus algates²⁵¹ husbands
hadde sorrow.
Then told he me how one La-
tumeus
Complained to his fellow Arius
That in his garden growed such a
tree,
On which he said how that his
wives three
Hanged themselves for heart dispi-
teous.

²⁵⁰sort of.

²⁵¹always.

THE PROLOGUE

"O leve²⁵² brother," quoth this Ar-
ius,
"Give me a plant of thilke²⁵³
blessed tree,
And in my garden planted shall it
be."
Of later date of wives hath he read,
That some have slain their hus-
bands in their bed,
And let their lechour dight them²⁵⁴
all the night,
While that the corpse lay on the
floor upright:
And some have driven nails into
their brain,

²⁵²dear

²⁵³that.

²⁵⁴lover ride them.

THE PROLOGUE

While that they slept, and thus
they have them slain:
Some have them given poison in
their drink:
He spake more harm than hearte
may bethink.
And therewithal he knew of more
proverbs,
Than in this world there groweth
grass or herbs.
"Better (quoth he) thine habitation
Be with a lion, or a foul dragon,
Than with a woman using for to
chide.
Better (quoth he) high in the roof
abide,
Than with an angry woman in the
house,
They be so wicked and contrarious:

THE PROLOGUE

They hate that their husbands
loven aye."
He said, "A woman cast her shame
away
When she cast off her smock;" and
farthermo',
"A fair woman, but²⁵⁵ she be
chaste also,
Is like a gold ring in a sowe's nose.
Who coulde ween²⁵⁶, or who
coulde suppose
The woe that in mine heart was,
and the pine²⁵⁷?
And when I saw that he would

²⁵⁵except.

²⁵⁶thibk.

²⁵⁷pain.

THE PROLOGUE

never fine²⁵⁸
To readen on this cursed book all
night,
All suddenly three leaves have I
plight²⁵⁹
Out of his book, right as he read,
and eke
I with my fist so took him on the
cheek,
That in our fire he backward fell
adown.
And he up start, as doth a wood
lion²⁶⁰,
And with his fist he smote me on
the head,

²⁵⁸finish.

²⁵⁹plucked.

²⁶⁰furious.

THE PROLOGUE

That on the floor I lay as I were
dead.
And when he saw how still that
there I lay,
He was aghast, and would have
fled away,
Till at the last out of my swoon I
braid²⁶¹,
"Oh, hast thou slain me, thou false
thief?" I said
"And for my land thus hast thou
murder'd me?
Ere I be dead, yet will I kisse thee."
And near he came, and kneeled fair
adown,
And saide", "Deare sister Alisoun,
As help me God, I shall thee never

²⁶¹woke.

smite:

That I have done it is thyself to
wite²⁶²,

Forgive it me, and that I thee be-
seek²⁶³."

And yet eftsoons²⁶⁴ I hit him on
the cheek,

And saidde, "Thief, thus much am
I awreak²⁶⁵."

Now will I die, I may no longer
speak."

But at the last, with mucche care
and woe

²⁶²blame.

²⁶³beseech.

²⁶⁴immediately; again.

²⁶⁵avenged.

THE PROLOGUE

We fell accorded²⁶⁶ by ourselves
two:

He gave me all the bridle in mine
hand

To have the governance of house
and land,

And of his tongue, and of his hand
also.

I made him burn his book anon
right tho²⁶⁷.

And when that I had gotten unto
me

By mast'ry all the sovereignty,
And that he said, "Mine owen true
wife,

²⁶⁶agreed.

²⁶⁷then.

THE PROLOGUE

Do as thee list²⁶⁸, the term of all
thy life,
Keep thine honour, and eke keep
mine estate;
After that day we never had de-
bate.
God help me so, I was to him as
kind
As any wife from Denmark unto
Ind,
And also true, and so was he to me:
I pray to God that sits in majesty
So bless his soule, for his mercy
dear.
Now will I say my tale, if ye will
hear. –
The Friar laugh'd when he had

²⁶⁸as pleases thee.

heard all this:

"Now, Dame," quoth he, "so have I
joy and bliss,

This is a long preamble of a tale."

And when the Sompnour heard the
Friar gale²⁶⁹,

"Lo," quoth this Sompnour,
"Godde's armes two,

A friar will intermete²⁷⁰ him ev-
ermo': (*Note 33*)

Lo, goode men, a fly and eke a frere
Will fall in ev'ry dish and eke mat-
tere.

What speak'st thou of perambula-
tion²⁷¹?

²⁶⁹ speak.

²⁷⁰ interpose.

²⁷¹ preamble.

THE PROLOGUE

What? amble or trot; or peace, or
go sit down:

Thou lettest²⁷² our disport in this
mattere."

"Yea, wilt thou so, Sir Sompnour?"
quoth the Frere;

"Now by my faith I shall, ere that I
go,

Tell of a Sompnour such a tale or
two,

That all the folk shall laughen in
this place."

"Now do, else, Friar, I beshrew²⁷³
thy face,"

Quoth this Sompnour; "and I
beshrewe me,

²⁷²hinderesst.

²⁷³curse.

But if²⁷⁴ I telle tales two or three
Of friars, ere I come to Sitting-
bourne,
That I shall make thine hearte for
to mourn:
For well I wot thy patience is
gone."
Our Hoste cried, "Peace, and that
anon;"
And saide, "Let the woman tell her
tale.
Ye fare²⁷⁵ as folk that drunken be
of ale.
Do, Dame, tell forth your tale, and
that is best."
"All ready, sir," quoth she, "right as

²⁷⁴unless.

²⁷⁵behave.

you lest²⁷⁶,
If I have licence of this worthy
Frere."
"Yes, Dame," quoth he, "tell forth,
and I will hear."

²⁷⁶please.

THE TALE

(Note 1)

In olde dayes of the king Arthour,
Of which that Britons speake great
honour,
All was this land full fill'd of

faerie²⁷⁷;
 The Elf-queen, with her jolly com-
 pany,
 Danced full oft in many a green
 mead
 This was the old opinion, as I read;
 I speak of many hundred years
 ago;
 But now can no man see none elves
 mo',
 For now the great charity and
 prayeres
 Of limitours²⁷⁸, and other holy fr-
 eres, (*Note 2*)
 That search every land and ev'ry
 stream

²⁷⁷ fairies.

²⁷⁸ begging friars.

As thicke as motes in the sunne-
beam,
Blessing halls, chambers, kitch-
enes, and bowers,
Cities and burghes, castles high
and towers,
Thorpes²⁷⁹ and barnes, shepens²⁸⁰
and dairies, (*Note 3*)
This makes that there be now no
faeries:
For there as²⁸¹ went to walke was
an elf,
There walketh now the limitour
himself,

²⁷⁹villages.

²⁸⁰stables.

²⁸¹where.

In undermeles²⁸² and in morrow-
ings²⁸³, (*Note 4*)

And saith his matins and his holy
things,

As he goes in his limitatioun²⁸⁴.

Women may now go safely up and
down,

In every bush, and under every
tree;

There is none other incubus (*Note*
5) but he;

And he will do to them no dishon-
our.

And so befell it, that this king
Arthour

²⁸²evenings.

²⁸³mornings.

²⁸⁴begging district.

Had in his house a lusty bachelor,
 That on a day came riding from
 river: (*Note 6*)
 And happen'd, that, alone as she
 was born,
 He saw a maiden walking him be-
 forn,
 Of which maiden anon, maugre²⁸⁵
 her head,
 By very force he reft her maiden-
 head:
 For which oppression was such
 clamour,
 And such pursuit unto the king
 Arthour,
 That damned²⁸⁶ was this knight

²⁸⁵in spite of.

²⁸⁶condemned.

for to be dead
By course of law, and should have
lost his head;
(Paraventure such was the statute
tho²⁸⁷),
But that the queen and other ladies
mo'
So long they prayed the king of his
grace,
Till he his life him granted in the
place,
And gave him to the queen, all at
her will
To choose whether she would him
save or spill²⁸⁸
The queen thanked the king with

²⁸⁷ then.

²⁸⁸ destroy.

all her might;
And, after this, thus spake she to
the knight,
When that she saw her time upon a
day.
"Thou standest yet," quoth she, "in
such array²⁸⁹,
That of thy life yet hast thou no
surety;
I grant thee life, if thou canst tell to
me
What thing is it that women most
desiren:
Beware, and keep thy neck-bone
from the iron²⁹⁰
And if thou canst not tell it me

²⁸⁹a position.

²⁹⁰executioner's axe.

anon,
Yet will I give thee leave for to gon
A twelvemonth and a day, to seek
and lear²⁹¹
An answer suffisant²⁹² in this mat-
tere.
And surety will I have, ere that
thou pace²⁹³,
Thy body for to yelden in this
place."
Woe was the knight, and sorrow-
fully siked²⁹⁴;
But what? he might not do all as
him liked.

²⁹¹learn.

²⁹²satisfactory.

²⁹³go.

²⁹⁴sighed.

And at the last he chose him for to
wend²⁹⁵,
And come again, right at the
yeare's end,
With such answer as God would
him purvey²⁹⁶:
And took his leave, and wended
forth his way.

He sought in ev'ry house and ev'ry
place,
Where as he hoped for to finde
grace,
To learne what thing women love
the most:
But he could not arrive in any
coast,

²⁹⁵depart.

²⁹⁶provide.

Where as he mighte find in this
 mattere
Two creatures according in fere²⁹⁷.
Some said that women loved best
 richess,
Some said honour, and some said
 jolliness,
Some rich array, and some said
 lust²⁹⁸ a-bed,
And oft time to be widow and be
 wed.
Some said, that we are in our heart
 most eased
When that we are y-flatter'd and y-
 praised.

²⁹⁷ agreeing together.

²⁹⁸ pleasure.

He went full nigh the sooth²⁹⁹, I
 will not lie;
 A man shall win us best with flat-
 tery;
 And with attendance, and with
 business
 Be we y-limed³⁰⁰, bothe more and
 less.
 And some men said that we do
 love the best
 For to be free, and do right as us
 lest³⁰¹,
 And that no man reprove us of our
 vice,
 But say that we are wise, and noth-

²⁹⁹came very near the truth.

³⁰⁰caught with bird-lime.

³⁰¹whatever we please.

ing nice³⁰², (*Note 7*)
For truly there is none among us
all,
If any wight will claw us on the
gall³⁰³
That will not kick, for that he saith
us sooth:
Assay³⁰⁴, and he shall find it, that
so do'th.
For be we never so vicious within,
We will be held both wise and
clean of sin.
And some men said, that great de-
light have we
For to be held stable and eke se-

³⁰²foolish.

³⁰³see note 8

³⁰⁴try.

cre³⁰⁵,
 And in one purpose steadfastly to
 dwell,
 And not bewray³⁰⁶ a thing that
 men us tell.
 But that tale is not worth a rake-
 stele³⁰⁷.
 Pardie, we women canne nothing
 hele³⁰⁸, (*Note 9*)
 Witness on Midas; will ye hear the
 tale?
 Ovid, amonges other thinges
 smale³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵discreet.

³⁰⁶give away.

³⁰⁷rake-handle.

³⁰⁸hide.

³⁰⁹small.

Saith, Midas had, under his longe
hairs,
Growing upon his head two ass's
ears;
The whiche vice he hid, as best he
might,
Full subtley from every man's
sight,
That, save his wife, there knew of
it no mo';
He lov'd her most, and trusted her
also;
He prayed her, that to no creature
She woulde tellen of his disfigure.
She swore him, nay, for all the
world to win,
She would not do that villainy or
sin,
To make her husband have so foul

a name:
She would not tell it for her owen
shame.
But nathelless her thoughte that she
died,
That she so longe should a counsel
hide;
Her thought it swell'd so sore
about her heart
That needes must some word from
her astart
And, since she durst not tell it unto
man
Down to a marish fast thereby she
ran,
Till she came there, her heart was
all afire:

And, as a bittern bumbles³¹⁰ in the
mire,
She laid her mouth unto the water
down
"Bewray me not, thou water, with
thy soun'"
Quoth she, "to thee I tell it, and no
mo',
Mine husband hath long ass's eares
two!
Now is mine heart all whole; now
is it out;
I might no longer keep it, out of
doubt."
Here may ye see, though we a time
abide,
Yet out it must, we can no counsel

³¹⁰makes a humming noise.

hide.

The remnant of the tale, if ye will
hear,
Read in Ovid, and there ye may it
lear³¹¹.

This knight, of whom my tale is
specially,
When that he saw he might not
come thereby,
That is to say, what women love
the most,
Within his breast full sorrowful
was his ghost³¹².
But home he went, for he might not
sojourn,
The day was come, that homeward

³¹¹learn.

³¹²spirit.

he must turn.
And in his way it happen'd him to
ride,
In all his care³¹³, under a forest
side,
Where as he saw upon a dance go
Of ladies four-and-twenty, and yet
mo',
Toward this ilke³¹⁴ dance he drew
full yern³¹⁵, (*Note 10*)
The hope that he some wisdom
there should learn;
But certainly, ere he came fully
there,
Y-vanish'd was this dance, he

³¹³trouble, anxiety.

³¹⁴same.

³¹⁵eagerly.

knew not where;
No creature saw he that bare life,
Save on the green he sitting saw a
wife,
A fouler wight there may no man
devise³¹⁶.
Against³¹⁷ this knight this old wife
gan to rise,
And said, "Sir Knight, hereforth³¹⁸
lieth no way.
Tell me what ye are seeking, by
your fay.
Paraventure it may the better be:
These olde folk know mucche
thing." quoth she.

³¹⁶imagine, tell.

³¹⁷to meet.

³¹⁸from here.

My leve³¹⁹ mother," quoth this
knight, "certain,
I am but dead, but if³²⁰ that I can
sayn
What thing it is that women most
desire:
Could ye me wiss, I would well
quite your hire³²¹." (*Note 11*)
"Plight me thy troth here in mine
hand³²²," quoth she,
"The nexte thing that I require of
thee
Thou shalt it do, if it be in thy
might,

³¹⁹dear.

³²⁰unless.

³²¹instruct.

³²²reward you.

And I will tell it thee ere it be
night."

"Have here my trothe," quoth the
knight; "I grant."

"Thenne," quoth she, "I dare me
well avaunt³²³,

Thy life is safe, for I will stand
thereby,

Upon my life the queen will say as
I:

Let see, which is the proudest of
them all,

That wears either a kerchief or a
caul,

That dare say nay to that I shall you
teach.

Let us go forth withoute longer

³²³boast, affirm.

speech

Then rownded she a pistel³²⁴ in his
ear,
And bade him to be glad, and have
no fear.

When they were come unto the
court, this knight
Said, he had held his day, as he had
hight³²⁵,
And ready was his answer, as he
said.
Full many a noble wife, and many
a maid,
And many a widow, for that they
be wise, –

³²⁴she whispered a secret.

³²⁵promised.

The queen herself sitting as a justice, –
Assembled be, his answer for to hear,
And afterward this knight was bid appear.
To every wight commanded was silence,
And that the knight should tell in audience,
What thing that worldly women love the best.
This knight he stood not still, as doth a beast,
But to this question anon answer'd
With manly voice, that all the court it heard,
"My liege lady, generally," quoth he,

"Women desire to have the
sovereignty
As well over their husband as their
love
And for to be in mast'ry him above.
This is your most desire, though ye
me kill,
Do as you list, I am here at your
will."
In all the court there was no wife
nor maid
Nor widow, that contraried what
he said,
But said, he worthy was to have his
life.
And with that word up start that
olde wife
Which that the knight saw sitting
on the green.

"Mercy," quoth she, "my sovereign
lady queen,
Ere that your court departe, do me
right.

I taughte this answer unto this
knight,

For which he plighted me his
trothe there,

The firste thing I would of him re-
quere,

He would it do, if it lay in his
might.

Before this court then pray I thee,
Sir Knight,"

Quoth she, "that thou me take unto
thy wife,

For well thou know'st that I have

kept³²⁶ thy life.
If I say false, say nay, upon thy
fay³²⁷."

This knight answer'd, "Alas, and
well-away!
I know right well that such was my
behest³²⁸ .
For Godde's love choose a new re-
quest
Take all my good, and let my body
go."
"Nay, then," quoth she, "I shrew³²⁹
us bothe two,
For though that I be old, and foul,

³²⁶preserved.

³²⁷faith.

³²⁸promise.

³²⁹curse.

and poor,
 I n'ould³³⁰ for all the metal nor the
 ore,
 That under earth is grave³³¹, or lies
 above
 But if thy wife I were and eke thy
 love."
 "My love?" quoth he, "nay, my
 damnation,
 Alas! that any of my nation
 Should ever so foul disparaged be.
 But all for nought; the end is this,
 that he
 Constrained was, that needs he
 muste wed,
 And take this olde wife, and go to

³³⁰would not.

³³¹buried.

bed.

Now woulde some men say par-
aventure

That for my negligence I do no
cure³³²

To tell you all the joy and all th' ar-
ray

That at the feast was made that
ilke³³³ day.

To which thing shortly answeren I
shall:

I say there was no joy nor feast at
all,

There was but heaviness and
muche sorrow:

³³²take no pains.

³³³same.

For privily he wed her on the mor-
row;
And all day after hid him as an
owl,
So woe was him, his wife look'd so
foul
Great was the woe the knight had
in his thought
When he was with his wife to bed
y-brought;
He wallow'd, and he turned to and
fro.
This olde wife lay smiling evermo',
And said, "Dear husband,
benedicite,
Fares every knight thus with his
wife as ye?
Is this the law of king Arthoures
house?"

Is every knight of his thus dangerous³³⁴?

I am your owen love, and eke your wife

I am she, which that saved hath your life

And certes yet did I you ne'er unright.

Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?

Ye fare like a man had lost his wit.

What is my guilt? for God's love tell me it,

And it shall be amended, if I may."

"Amended!" quoth this knight;
"alas, nay, nay,

It will not be amended, never mo';

³³⁴fastidious, niggardly.

Thou art so loathly, and so old also,
 And thereto³³⁵ comest of so low a
 kind,
 That little wonder though I wallow
 and wind³³⁶;
 So woulde God, mine hearte
 woulde brest³³⁷!"
 "Is this," quoth she, "the cause of
 your unrest?"
 "Yea, certainly," quoth he; "no won-
 der is."
 "Now, Sir," quoth she, "I could
 amend all this,
 If that me list, ere it were dayes
 three,

³³⁵in addition.

³³⁶writhe, turn about.

³³⁷burst.

So well ye mighte bear you unto
 me³³⁸
 But, for ye speaken of such gentle-
 ness
 As is descended out of old richness,
 That therefore shalle ye be gentle-
 men;
 Such arrogancy is not worth a
 hen³³⁹.
 Look who that is most virtuous al-
 way,
 Prive and apert³⁴⁰, and most inten-
 deth aye
 To do the gentle deedes that he can;
 And take him for the greatest gen-

³³⁸if you could conduct yourself well towards me.

³³⁹worth nothing.

³⁴⁰in private and public.

tleman.
Christ will³⁴¹, we claim of him our
gentleness,
Not of our elders³⁴² for their old
richess.
For though they gave us all their
heritage,
For which we claim to be of high
parage³⁴³,
Yet may they not bequeathe, for no
thing,
To none of us, their virtuous living
That made them gentlemen called
to be,
And bade us follow them in such

³⁴¹wills, requires.

³⁴²ancestors.

³⁴³birth, descent.

degree.

Well can the wise poet of Florence,
That highte Dante, speak of this
sentence³⁴⁴,

Lo, in such manner³⁴⁵ rhyme is
Dante's tale.

'Full seld'³⁴⁶ upriseth by his
branches smale

Prowess of man, for God of his
goodness

Wills that we claim of him our gen-
tleness;' (*Note 12*)

For of our elders may we nothing
claim

But temp'ral things that man may

³⁴⁴sentiment.

³⁴⁵kind of.

³⁴⁶seldom.

hurt and maim.
 Eke every wight knows this as well
 as I,
 If gentleness were planted natu-
 rally
 Unto a certain lineage down the
 line,
 Prive and apert, then would they
 never fine³⁴⁷
 To do of gentleness the fair office
 Then might they do no villainy nor
 vice.
 Take fire, and bear it to the darkest
 house
 Betwixt this and the mount of Cau-
 casus,
 And let men shut the doores, and

³⁴⁷ cease.

go thenne³⁴⁸,
 Yet will the fire as fair and lighte
 brenne³⁴⁹
 As twenty thousand men might it
 behold;
 Its office natural aye will it hold³⁵⁰,
 On peril of my life, till that it die.
 Here may ye see well how that gen-
 tery³⁵¹
 Is not annexed to possession,
 Since folk do not their operation
 Alway, as doth the fire, lo, in its
 kind³⁵²

³⁴⁸thence.

³⁴⁹burn.

³⁵⁰it will perform its natural duty.

³⁵¹gentility, nobility.

³⁵²from its very nature

For, God it wot, men may full often
 find
 A lorde's son do shame and vil-
 lainy.
 And he that will have price³⁵³ of
 his gent'ry,
 For³⁵⁴ he was boren of a gentle
 house,
 And had his elders noble and vir-
 tuous,
 And will himselfe do no gentle
 deedes,
 Nor follow his gentle ancestry, that
 dead is,
 He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
 For villain sinful deedes make a

³⁵³esteem, honour.

³⁵⁴because.

churl.

For gentleness is but the
renomee³⁵⁵

Of thine ancestors, for their high
bounte³⁵⁶,

Which is a strange thing to thy per-
son:

Thy gentleness cometh from God
alone.

Then comes our very³⁵⁷ gentleness
of grace;

It was no thing bequeath'd us with
our place.

Think how noble, as saith Valerius,

³⁵⁵renown.

³⁵⁶goodness, worth.

³⁵⁷true.

Was thilke³⁵⁸ Tullius Hostilius,
 That out of povert' rose to high
 Read in Senec, and read eke in
 Boece,
 There shall ye see express, that it
 no drede³⁵⁹ is,
 That he is gentle that doth gentle
 deedes.
 And therefore, leve³⁶⁰ husband, I
 conclude,
 Albeit that mine ancestors were
 rude,
 Yet may the highe God, – and so
 hope I, –
 Grant me His grace to live virtu-

³⁵⁸that.

³⁵⁹doubt.

³⁶⁰dear.

ously:

Then am I gentle when that I begin
 To live virtuously, and waive³⁶¹
 sin.

"And whereas ye of povert' me
 reprove³⁶²,
 The highe God, on whom that we
 believe,
 In wilful povert' chose to lead his
 life:
 And certes, every man, maiden, or
 wife
 May understand that Jesus,
 heaven's king,
 Ne would not choose a virtuous
 living.

³⁶¹forsake.

³⁶²reproach.

Glad povert'³⁶³ is an honest thing,
 certain;

This will Senec and other clerkes
 sayn

Whoso that holds him paid of³⁶⁴
 his povert',

I hold him rich though he hath not
 a shirt.

He that coveteth is a poore wight
 For he would have what is not in
 his might

But he that nought hath, nor cov-
 eteth to have,

Is rich, although ye hold him but a
 knave³⁶⁵

³⁶³poverty cheerfully endured.

³⁶⁴is satisfied with.

³⁶⁵slave, abject wretch.

Very povert' is sinne³⁶⁶, properly.
Juvenal saith of povert' merrily:
The poore man, when he goes by
the way
Before the thieves he may sing and
play (*Note 13*)
Povert' is hateful good, (*Note 14*)
and, as I guess,
A full great bringer out of busi-
ness³⁶⁷;
A great amender eke of sapience
To him that taketh it in patience.
Povert' is this, although it seem
elenge³⁶⁸ (*Note 15*)
Possession that no wight will chal-

³⁶⁶the only true poverty is sin.

³⁶⁷deliver from trouble.

³⁶⁸strange.

lenge
 Povert' full often, when a man is
 low,
 Makes him his God and eke him-
 self to know
 Povert' a spectacle³⁶⁹ is, as thin-
 keth me
 Through which he may his very³⁷⁰
 friendes see.
 And, therefore, Sir, since that I you
 not grieve,
 Of my povert' no more me
 reprove³⁷¹.
 "Now, Sir, of elde³⁷² ye reprove me:

³⁶⁹a pair of spectacles.

³⁷⁰true.

³⁷¹reproach.

³⁷²age.

And certes, Sir, though none au-
thority³⁷³
Were in no book, ye gentles of hon-
our
Say, that men should an olde wight
honour,
And call him father, for your gen-
tleness;
And authors shall I finden, as I
guess.
Now there ye say that I am foul
and old,
Then dread ye not to be a coke-
wold³⁷⁴.
For filth, and elde, all so may I

³⁷³text, dictum.

³⁷⁴cuckold.

the³⁷⁵,
 Be greate wardens upon chastity.
 But natheless, since I know your
 delight,
 I shall fulfil your wordly appetite.
 Choose now," quoth she, "one of
 these thinges tway,
 To have me foul and old till that I
 dey³⁷⁶,
 And be to you a true humble wife,
 And never you displease in all my
 life:
 Or elles will ye have me young and
 fair,
 And take your aventure of the re-

³⁷⁵ thrive.

³⁷⁶ die.

pair³⁷⁷

That shall be to your house because
of me, –

Or in some other place, it may well
be?

Now choose yourselfe whether
that you liketh.

This knight adviseth³⁷⁸ him and
sore he siketh³⁷⁹.

But at the last he said in this man-
nere;

"My lady and my love, and wife so
dear,

I put me in your wise governance,
Choose for yourself which may be

³⁷⁷resort.

³⁷⁸considered.

³⁷⁹sighed.

most pleasance
And most honour to you and me
also;
I do no force³⁸⁰, the whether of the
two:
For as you liketh, it sufficeth me."
"Then have I got the mastery,"
quoth she,
"Since I may choose and govern as
me lest³⁸¹."
"Yea, certes wife," quoth he, "I hold
it best."
"Kiss me," quoth she, "we are no
longer wroth³⁸²,
For by my troth I will be to you

³⁸⁰care not

³⁸¹pleases.

³⁸²at variance.

both;
 This is to say, yea, bothe fair and
 good.
 I pray to God that I may sterve
 wood³⁸³,
 But³⁸⁴ I to you be all so good and
 true,
 As ever was wife since the world
 was new;
 And but³⁸⁵ I be to-morrow as fair
 to seen,
 As any lady, emperess or queen,
 That is betwixt the East and eke the
 West
 Do with my life and death right as

³⁸³die mad.

³⁸⁴unless.

³⁸⁵unless.

you lest@please.@@.
Cast up the curtain, and look how
it is."

And when the knight saw verily all
this,
That she so fair was, and so young
thereto,
For joy he hent³⁸⁶ her in his armes
two:

His hearte bathed in a bath of bliss,
A thousand times on row³⁸⁷ he gan
her kiss:

And she obeyed him in every thing
That mighte do him pleasance or
liking.

And thus they live unto their lives'

³⁸⁶took.

³⁸⁷in succession.

end
In perfect joy; and Jesus Christ us
send
Husbandes meek and young, and
fresh in bed,
And grace to overlive them that we
wed.
And eke I pray Jesus to short their
lives,
That will not be governed by their
wives.
And old and angry niggards of dis-
pence³⁸⁸,
God send them soon a very pesti-
lence!

³⁸⁸expense.