

our coffers have been crammed  
with stories such as these.  
Now let our Lord, thorn-crowned,  
bring us to perfect peace. AMEN.

HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE?

9. "Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind." This is the motto of the Order of the Garter, founded ca. 1350; apparently a copyist of the poem associated this order with the one founded to honor Gawain.

## GEOFFREY CHAUCER

ca. 1343–1400

Medieval social theory held that society was made up of three "estates": the nobility, composed of a small hereditary aristocracy, whose mission on earth was to rule over and defend the body politic; the church, whose duty was to look after the spiritual welfare of that body; and everyone else, the large mass of commoners who were supposed to do the work that provided for its physical needs. By the late fourteenth century, however, these basic categories were layered into complex, interrelated, and unstable social strata among which birth, wealth, profession, and personal ability all played a part in determining one's status in a world that was rapidly changing economically, politically, and socially. Chaucer's life and his works, especially *The Canterbury Tales*, were profoundly influenced by these forces. A growing and prosperous middle class was beginning to play increasingly important roles in church and state, blurring the traditional class boundaries, and it was into this middle class that Chaucer was born.

Chaucer was the son of a prosperous wine merchant and probably spent his boyhood in the mercantile atmosphere of London's Vintry, where ships docked with wines from France and Spain. Here he would have mixed daily with people of all sorts, heard several languages spoken, become fluent in French, and received schooling in Latin. Instead of apprenticing Chaucer to the family business, however, his father was apparently able to place him, in his early teens, as a page in one of the great aristocratic households of England, that of the countess of Ulster who was married to Prince Lionel, the second son of Edward III. There Chaucer would have acquired the manners and skills required for a career in the service of the ruling class, not only in the role of personal attendant in royal households but in a series of administrative posts. (For Chaucer's portrait, see the color insert in this volume.)

We can trace Chaucer's official and personal life in a considerable number of surviving historical documents, beginning with a reference, in Elizabeth of Ulster's household accounts, to an outfit he received as a page (1357). He was captured by the French and ransomed in one of Edward III's campaigns during the Hundred Years War (1359). He was a member of King Edward's personal household (1367) and took part in several diplomatic missions to Spain (1366), France (1368), and Italy (1372). As controller of customs on wool, sheepskins, and leather for the port of London (1374–85), Chaucer audited and kept books on the export taxes, which were one of the Crown's main sources of revenue. During this period he was living in a rent-free

toms job. He served as a justice of the peace and knight of the shire (the title given to members of Parliament) for the county of Kent (1385–86) where he moved after giving up the controllership. As clerk of the king's works (1389–91), Chaucer was responsible for the maintenance of numerous royal residences, parks, and other holdings; his duties included supervision of the construction of the nave of Westminster Abbey and of stands and lists for a celebrated tournament staged by Richard II. While the records show Chaucer receiving many grants and annuities in addition to his salary for these services, they also show that at times he was being pressed by creditors and obliged to borrow money.

These activities brought Chaucer into association with the ruling nobility of the kingdom, with Prince Lionel and his younger brother John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, England's most powerful baron during much of Chaucer's lifetime; with their father, King Edward; and with Edward's grandson, who succeeded to the throne as Richard II. Near the end of his life Chaucer addressed a comic

*Complaint to His Purse* to Henry IV—John of Gaunt's son, who had usurped the crown from his cousin Richard—as a reminder that the treasury owed Chaucer his annuity. Chaucer's wife, Philippa, served in the households of Edward's queen, and of John of Gaunt's second wife, Constance, daughter of the king of Castile. A Thomas Chaucer, who was probably Chaucer's son, was an eminent man in the next generation, and Thomas's daughter Alice was married successively to the earl of Salisbury and the duke of Suffolk. The gap between the commoners and the aristocracy would thus have been bridged by Chaucer's family in the course of three generations.

None of these documents contains any hint that this hardworking civil servant wrote poetry, although poetry would certainly have been among the diversions cultivated at English courts in Chaucer's youth. That poetry, however, would have been in French, which still remained the fashionable language and literature of the English aristocracy, whose culture in many ways had more in common with that of the French nobles with whom they warred than with that of their English subjects. Chaucer's earliest models, works by Guillaume de Machaut (1300?–1377) and Jean Froissart (1333?–1400?), the leading French poets of the day, were lyrics and narratives about courtly love, often cast in the form of a dream in which the poet acted as a protagonist or participant in some aristocratic love affair. The poetry of Machaut and Froissart derives from the thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose*, a long dream allegory in which the dreamer suffers many agonies and trials for the love of a symbolic rosebud. Chaucer's apprentice work may well have been a partial translation of the twenty-one-thousand-line *Romance*. His first important original poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, an elegy in the form of a dream vision commemorating



Middle-class Prosperity. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434. Note the way the religious elements of the scene are secondary to the fine, rich qualities of fabric represented here.

The diplomatic mission that sent Chaucer to Italy in 1372 was in all likelihood a milestone in his literary development. Although he may have acquired some knowledge of the language and literature from Italian merchants and bankers posted in London, this visit and a subsequent one to Florence (1378) brought him into direct contact with the Italian Renaissance. Probably he acquired manuscripts of works by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—the last two still alive at the time of Chaucer's visit, although he probably did not meet them. These writers provided him with models of new verse forms, new subject matter, and new modes of representation. *The House of Fame*, still a dream vision, takes the poet on a journey in the talons of a gigantic eagle to the celestial palace of the goddess Fame, a trip that at many points affectionately parodies Dante's journey in the *Divine Comedy*. In his dream vision *The Parliament of Fowls*, all the birds meet on St. Valentine's Day to choose their mates; their "parliament" humorously depicts the ways in which different classes in human society think and talk about love. Boccaccio provided sources for two of Chaucer's finest poems—although Chaucer never mentions his name: *The Knight's Tale*, the first of *The Canterbury Tales*, is based on Boccaccio's romance *Il Teseida* (The Story of Theseus). His longest completed poem, *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1385), which tells the story of how Trojan Prince Troilus loved and finally lost Criseyde to the Greek warrior Diomedes, is an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (The Love Stricken). Chaucer reworked the latter into one of the greatest love poems in any language. Even if he had never written *The Canterbury Tales*, Troilus would have secured Chaucer a place among the major English poets.

A final dream vision provides the frame for Chaucer's first experiment with a series of tales, the unfinished *Legend of Good Women*. In the dream, Chaucer is accused of heresy and antifeminism by Cupid, the god of love himself, and ordered to do penance by writing a series of "legends," i.e., saints' lives, of Cupid's martyrs; women who were betrayed by false men and died for love. Perhaps a noble patron, possibly Queen Anne, asked the poet to write something to make up for telling about Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus.

Throughout his life Chaucer also wrote moral and religious works, chiefly translations. Besides French, which was a second language for him, and Italian, Chaucer also read Latin. He made a prose translation of the Latin *Consolation of Philosophy*, written by the sixth-century Roman statesman Boethius while in prison awaiting execution for crimes for which he had been unjustly condemned. *The Consolation* became a favorite book for the Middle Ages, providing inspiration and comfort through its lesson that worldly fortune is deceitful and ephemeral and through the platonic doctrine that the body itself is only a prison house for the soul that aspires to eternal things. The influence of Boethius is deeply ingrained in *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus*. The ballade *Truth* compresses the Boethian and Christian teaching into three stanzas of homely moral advice.

Thus long before Chaucer conceived of *The Canterbury Tales*, his writings were many faceted: they embrace prose and poetry; human and divine love; French, Italian, and Latin sources; secular and religious influences; comedy and philosophy. Moreover, different elements are likely to mix in the same work, often making it difficult to extract from Chaucer simple, direct, and certain meanings.

This Chaucerian complexity owes much to the wide range of Chaucer's learning and his exposure to new literary currents on the Continent but perhaps also to the special social position he occupied as a member of a new class of civil servants. Born into the urban middle class, Chaucer, through his association with the court and service of the Crown, had attained the rank of "esquire," roughly equivalent to what would later be termed a "gentleman." His career brought him into contact with overlapping bourgeois and aristocratic social worlds, without his being securely anchored in either. Although he was born a commoner and continued to associate with commoners in his official life, he did not live as a commoner; and although his training

contact with the nobility, he must always have been conscious of the fact that he did not really belong to that society of which birth alone could make one a true member. Situated at the intersection of these social worlds, Chaucer had the gift of being able to view with both sympathy and humor the behaviors, beliefs, and pretensions of the diverse people who comprised the levels of society. Chaucer's art of being at once involved in and detached from a given situation is peculiarly his own, but that art position—men like Sir Philip de la Vache, to whom Chaucer addressed the humorous *envoy* to *Truth*; Chaucer belongs to an age when poetry was read aloud. A beautiful frontispiece to a manuscript of *Troilus* pictures the poet's public performance before a magnificently dressed royal audience, and he may well have been invited at times to read his poems at court. But besides addressing a listening audience, to whose allegorically superior taste and sensibility the poet often ironically defers (for example, *The General Prologue*, lines 745–48), Chaucer has in mind discriminating readers whom he might expect to share his sense of humor and his complex attitudes toward the company of "sondy folk" who make the pilgrimage to Canterbury.

The text given here is from E. V. Rieu's *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (1958, 1975) with some modifications. For *The Canterbury Tales* selected to improve consistency and has been modernized in so far as its possible Middle English pronunciation, grammar, and prosody is included in the introduction to "The Middle Ages" (pp. 19–25).

**The Canterbury Tales** Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales*—if we assume it to be the same as that which the fictional Host proposes at the end of *The General Prologue*—projected about one hundred twenty stories, two for each pilgrim to tell on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Chaucer actually completed only twenty-two and the beginnings of two others. He did write extending for the Host says to the Parson, who tells the last tale, that everyone except him has told "his tale." Indeed, the pilgrims never even get to Canterbury, which some miles east of London. From his house he might have been able to see Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in his cathedral in 1170. Medieval pilgrims were notorious tale tellers, and the sight and sound of the bands setting toward Canterbury may well have suggested to Chaucer the idea of using a fictitious pilgrimage as a framing device for a number of stories. Collections of stories linked by such a device were common in the later Middle Ages. Chaucer's contemporary John Gower had used one in his *Confessio Amantis* (see p. 346). The most famous medieval framing tale besides Chaucer's is Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which ten different narrators each tell a tale a day for ten days. Chaucer could have known the *Decameron*, which contains tales with plots analogous to plots found in *The Canterbury Tales*, but these stories were widespread, and there is no proof that Chaucer got them from Boccaccio.

Chaucer's artistic exploitation of the device is, in any case, altogether his own. Whereas in Gower a single speaker relates all the stories, and in Boccaccio the ten speakers are three young gentlemen and seven young ladies—all belonging to the same aristocratic social elite, Chaucer's pilgrim narrators represent a wide spectrum of social and occupational status. This device, however, should not be mistaken for "realism," which is unlikely that a group like Chaucer's pilgrims would ever have joined

listening to one another tell tales in verse. The variety of tellers is matched by the diversity of their tales: tales are assigned to appropriate narrators and juxtaposed to bring out contrasts in genre, style, tone, and values. Thus the Knight's courtly romance about the rivalry of two noble lovers for a lady is followed by the Miller's fabliau of the seduction of an old carpenter's young wife by a student. In several of *The Canterbury Tales* there is a fascinating accord between the narrators and their teller in *The General Prologue* and elsewhere, and the character itself grows and is revealed by the story. Chaucer conducts two fictions simultaneously—that of the individual tale and that of the pilgrim to whom he has assigned it. He develops the second fiction not only through *The General Prologue* but also through the "links," the interchanges among pilgrims connecting the stories. These interchanges sometimes lead to quarrels. Thus *The Miller's Tale* offends the Reeve, who takes the figure of the Miller's foolish, cuckolded carpenter as directed personally at himself, and he retaliates with a story satirizing an arrogant miller very much like the pilgrim Miller. The antagonism of the two tellers provides comedy in the links and enhances the comedy of their tales. The links also offer interesting literary commentary on the tales by members of the pilgrim audience, especially the Host, whom the pilgrims have declared "gouvernour" and "juge" of the storytelling. Further dramatic interest is created by the fact that several tales respond to topics taken up by previous tellers. The Wife of Bath's thesis that women should have sovereignty over men in marriage gets a reply from the Clerk, which in turn elicits responses from the Merchant and the Franklin. The tales have their own logic and interest quite apart from the framing fiction; no other medieval framing fiction, however, has such varied and lively interaction between the frame and the individual stories.

The composition of none of the tales can be accurately dated; most of them were written during the last fourteen years of Chaucer's life, although a few were probably written earlier and inserted into *The Canterbury Tales*. The popularity of the poem in late medieval England is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts: more than eighty, none from Chaucer's lifetime. It was also twice printed by William Caxton, who introduced printing to England in 1476, and often reprinted by Caxton's early successors. The manuscripts reflect the unfinished state of the poem—the fact that when he died Chaucer had not made up his mind about a number of details and hence left many inconsistencies. The poem appears in the manuscripts as nine or ten "fragments" or blocks of tales; the order of the poems within each fragment is generally the same, but the order of the fragments themselves varies widely. The fragment containing *The General Prologue*, the Knight's, Miller's, and Reeve's tales; and the Cook's unfinished tale, always comes first, and the fragment consisting of *The Parson's Tale* and *The Retraction* always comes last. But the others, such as that containing the Wife of Bath, the Friar, and the Summoner or that consisting of the Physician and Pardoner or the longest fragment, consisting of six tales concluding with the Nun's Priest's, are by no means stable in relation to one another. The order followed here, that of the Ellesmere manuscript, has been adopted as the most nearly satisfactory.

# THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

Chaucer did not need to make a pilgrimage himself to meet the types of people that his fictitious pilgrimage includes, because most of them had long inhabited literature as well as life: the ideal Knight, who had taken part in all the major expeditions and battles of the crusades during the last half-century, his fashionably dressed son, the Squire, a typical young lover, the lady Priores, the hunting Monk, and the flattering Friar, who practice the little vanities and larger vices for which such ecclesiastics were conventionally attacked; the prosperous Franklin, the fraudulent Doctor, the lusty

orders to that spellbinding preacher and mercenary, the Pardoner, peddling his paper indulgences and phony relics. One meets all these types throughout medieval literature, but particularly in a genre called estates satire, which sets out to expose and pillory typical examples of corruption at all levels of society. (For more information on estates satire, see the "Medieval Estates and Orders" topic in the supplemental ebook.) A remarkable number of details in *The General Prologue* could have been taken straight out of books as well as drawn from life. Although it has been argued that some of the pilgrims are portraits of actual people, the impression that they are drawn from life is more likely to be a function of Chaucer's art, which is able to endow types with a reality we generally associate only with people we know. The salient features of each pilgrim leap out randomly at the reader, as they might to an observer concerned only with what meets the eye. This imitation of the way our minds actually perceive reality may make us fail to notice the care with which Chaucer has selected his details to give an integrated sketch of the person being described. Most of these details give something more than mere verisimilitude to the description. The pilgrims' facial features, the clothes they wear, the foods they like to eat, the things they say, the work they do are all clues not only to their social rank but to their moral and spiritual condition and, through the accumulation of detail, to the condition of late-medieval society, of which, collectively, they are representative. What uniquely distinguishes Chaucer's prologue from more conventional estates satire, such as the *Prologue to Piers Plowman*, is the suppression in all but a few flagrant instances of overt moral judgment. The narrator, in fact, seems to be expressing chiefly admiration and praise at the superlative skills and accomplishments of this particular group, even such dubious ones as the Friar's begging techniques or the Manciple's success in cheating the learned lawyers who employ him. The reader is left free to draw out the ironic implications of details presented with such seeming artlessness, even while falling in with the easygoing mood of "felawshyp" that pervades Chaucer's prologue to the pilgrimage.

FROM THE CANTERBURY TALES

# The General Prologue

1000 When that April with his<sup>o</sup> showres soote<sup>o</sup> us / fresh  
 1010 The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,  
 1020 And bathed every veine<sup>1</sup> in swich<sup>2</sup> licour,<sup>o</sup> such / liquid  
 1030 Of which vertu<sup>2</sup> engendred is the flower,  
 1040 Whan Zephyrus eek<sup>3</sup> with his sweete breeth  
 1050 Inspired<sup>3</sup> hath in every holt<sup>4</sup> and heeth<sup>o</sup> also  
 1060 The tendre croppes<sup>5</sup>, and the yonge sonne<sup>4</sup> grove / field  
 1070 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,  
 1080 And smale fowles<sup>6</sup> maken melodye shoots  
 1090 That sleepen al the night with open yē<sup>o</sup> birds  
 1100 So priketh hem<sup>o</sup> Nature in hir corages<sup>5</sup> eye  
 1110 Thanne longen folk to goon<sup>o</sup> for pilgrimages, them  
 1120 And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes go  
 1130 To freme halwes,<sup>6</sup> couthe<sup>o</sup> in sondry<sup>o</sup> londes, known / various

5. Their hears,  
6. Far-off shrines, "Palmeres," palmer, wide-  
ranging pilgrims—especially those who sought  
out the "strange strondes" (foreign shores) of the  
H.C. 1.1-3

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## INTRODUCTION



### CHAUCEER'S LIFE

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the early 1340s though no one knows the exact year. Both his parents belonged to rich merchant families, and his father, John, had served as an officer of the royal court. He was educated in London, possibly at Saint Paul's Cathedral, and later in the great aristocratic courts, where he played a variety of roles. Although a commoner, he moved in the highest circles, beginning as a page in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, the wife of Prince Lionel, one of the sons of King Edward III. There he came to know John of Gaunt, another of Edward's sons and father of the future King Henry IV.

Before he was twenty, Chaucer took part in a military expedition to France, one episode in the Hundred Years' War that smoldered with episodic flare-ups throughout his lifetime. He was captured near Reims and promptly ransomed along with other prisoners. Though this was the beginning and end of his military career, he later came to know parts of Europe well through extended trips to France, Spain, Flanders, and Italy, generally on government business.

In 1366 Chaucer married Philippa de Roet, a court lady from northern France whose life, like his, intertwined with the English royal family's. She was lady-in-waiting to the queen and later to Constance of Castile, John of Gaunt's second wife. Her sister, Katherine Swynford, was John of Gaunt's mistress and later his wife.

In his twenties Chaucer was recognized as an esquire, the first degree of knighthood though still somewhat below the aristocracy. He may also have been studying then at one of the Inns of Court, the London law societies that governed the legal profession. There is no record he ever attended Oxford or Cambridge, the two British universities of the time.

In 1372, still only about thirty years old, Chaucer traveled as part of an embassy to Genoa and later visited Florence, where he might have met Petrarch and Boccaccio, two famous poets he draws on repeatedly throughout his work.

Soon after, he was appointed controller of duties on wool for the port of London, a critical post he held for the next dozen years. Wool was England's

chief exchange commodity, and the export tax on wool was a vital source of government funds. As controller, Chaucer saw to it that the tax collectors were honest. When he wrote about graft and corruption, as he often does in *The Canterbury Tales*, he undoubtedly understood precisely what he was talking about.

Edward III died in 1376, but Chaucer continued to prosper under Richard II. In 1382 he became controller of customs on wine and other goods as well as wool. But not long after that his life began to change, partly in response to political upheavals in both Parliament and the court. Philippa died, apparently in 1387, and by 1388 Chaucer had quit the customs post and was living in nearby Kent, where he was elected to the House of Commons.

In 1388 a dissatisfied faction in Parliament executed several of King Richard's supporters, including three who were associated with Chaucer. Chaucer survived the purge and went on to be appointed clerk of the king's works, responsible for special projects and royal properties including Westminster Palace and the Tower of London. Three years later, he became deputy forester for North Petherton, where he was involved in overseeing forests, commons, villages, farms, roads, and rents in a large tract of Somerset.

In 1399 Henry Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt's exiled son, returned to England, overthrew King Richard, and was recognized as Henry IV. Chaucer was in London that year, living on the grounds of Westminster Abbey. Once again he weathered the political storm handily. Henry IV confirmed his royal grants and even added to them.

According to an inscription carved on his tomb many years later, Chaucer died on October 25, 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, where his grave became the nucleus of the famous "Poets' Corner."

Other records of Chaucer's personal life are generally sketchy. He and Philippa had two sons, Lewis and Thomas, and probably two daughters, Agnes and Elizabeth, who became a nun. Thomas enjoyed a brilliant career as speaker of the House of Commons and envoy to France. His grandson—Chaucer's great-grandson—was later Earl of Lincoln and designated heir to King Richard III before the king was killed at Bosworth Field.

In 1380 Chaucer was released from legal actions concerning the *reppyns*, or rape, of an heiress, Cecilia Chaumpaigne. The event sounds more dramatic than it probably was. Chaucer may have been involved in helping the girl elope or in abducting her to marry someone else. In 1324 his own father had been abducted for the same purpose.

Six years later Chaucer was called to testify in a dispute about a coat of arms, and in 1388 he was sued for debts left over from his customs days. This does not mean he was poor; probably, like the government that paid

him, he was just slow to settle his accounts. Finally, in 1390 as royal clerk, he was robbed and apparently wounded, presumably while carrying royal funds for wages or building materials.

## CHAUCEUR'S WORLD

Although he traveled widely throughout his career as a court functionary, diplomat, and administrator, Chaucer was essentially a Londoner, growing up in a merchant enclave near the Thames and living in and around the city the rest of his life. With only about 40,000 people, London was a small town by modern standards, but it was also the cosmopolitan center of a diverse and energetic nation. As a wine-importer's son, Chaucer met foreigners from all over Europe. He must have known at least a few well enough to learn their languages, especially Parisian French and Italian, which were not taught in schools.

Chaucer's London teemed with a variety of people and professions. Tradespeople tended to live and keep shops in neighborhoods associated with their crafts or guilds—goldsmiths, clothiers, stationers, butchers, and so on—so a short walk would present a kaleidoscope of sense impressions, especially within the city walls, which still stood in Chaucer's days. Outside the walls to the west ran The Strand, a mile-long thoroughfare lined with law courts and palaces he would have passed as he went to conduct business at the royal court in Westminster. This to-and-froing between the lively, mercantile city and the aristocratic court provides a good emblem of the diversity of Chaucer's experiences and his own ambiguous social standing.

Away from London, where Chaucer must often have gone as royal clerk and deputy forester, the countryside quickly became rougher and wilder. Villages like Chaucer's "Bob-up-and-down" on the way to Canterbury stood close together along the road, which was sometimes no more than a muddy track. Most were quite small, perhaps only a huddle of poor houses around a village pond and communal green. Market towns were spaced at wider intervals among a patchwork of manors, woodlands, chases, parks, and commons. Estates belonging to noble lords or monasteries controlled much of economic life through the labor of serfs who worked for just their keep or villans who tended plots that they rented for a portion of their crops. Both groups were bound to the estates they served. In good years they led a hard-scrabble life like old Janicula in "The Clerk's Tale" or the widow in the Nun's Priest's. In bad years many starved.



Overseas, as Chaucer had several occasions to observe, new ideas were in the air. In northern Italy the Renaissance was already stirring in city-states like Florence, then more than twice the size of London. Dante and Chaucer's later favorites Petrarch and Boccaccio led the way in literature, while Giotto set a new standard of realism in painting. France excelled in music, largely through the *Ars nova* compositions of Guillaume de Machaut, whose poems Chaucer translated. The leading thinker of the age, though he was often in disgrace, was the revolutionary William of Ockham, an Englishman who spent most of his life on the Continent. Like other progressives of the time, Ockham mistrusted elaborate systems based on untestable principles such as natural law. He tried to make sense of the world on the simplest possible terms using direct experience. Closer to home, John Wycliffe, an Oxford theologian, called for a new simplicity in spiritual life, sending out "poor priests" to beg and preach. Wycliffe also denied the doctrine of transubstantiation, which he thought insufficiently grounded in the Bible, and started a movement to translate the Bible into English so that people would be less dependent on priests to tell them what it said. Though they came at the issue in different ways, both Ockham and Wycliffe sought to flatten the religious bureaucracy that had grown up between ordinary people and God. In particular, both opposed the vast wealth and convoluted hierarchy the Church had acquired over centuries.

Although his era in England is usually thought to belong to the Middle Ages, Chaucer clearly felt a new world coming into being and responded to it in his writings, especially in *The Canterbury Tales*. In spite of the turbulence and misfortunes of the time—the historian Barbara Tuchman called it "the calamitous fourteenth century"—people were increasingly interested in breaking with the past and assuming greater control of their lives. In this, as in many ways, Chaucer was a leader. Even when his work is based on medieval forms like the romance or fabliau, its spirit is crisply modern—critical, innovative, diverse, and strongly interested in individual identity and experience.

## CHAUCEER'S TIMES

The 14th century was calamitous indeed. Two cold, wet growing seasons in 1314 and 1315 led to The Great Famine, in which not only peasants but also churchmen and nobles died across Europe. I have already mentioned the Hundred Years' War, 1337–1453, an ugly, interminable contest between En-

gland and France. A succession of English kings considered they had a claim to the French throne and pursued it through a series of brilliant battles, such as Crécy and Poitiers. But each victory was swallowed up by long periods of stagnation, and the war settled nothing until well after Chaucer's death. In the meantime, conscription, taxes, destruction, and lost crops eroded economic and civic life, especially in France, where most of the fighting took place.

This was the period, too, of the Avignon Papacy, 1305–78, when for over seventy years popes ruled the Catholic Church not from Rome, but from Avignon in France and in a way generally friendly to French interests. If there had ever been a doubt that secular politics could shape church policy, Avignon is where it died. From 1378 to 1414 matters deteriorated even further during the supremacy of two popes, one at Rome and one in France, each putting the other and his supporters under excommunication. Between consternation in Rome and Avignon at the top, a thoroughly un-Christlike accumulation of wealth in the middle, and widespread corruption at the bottom, no other era has been more damaging to the credibility of the Church.

Another defining event of Chaucer's time was the Black Plague. In the middle of the century (1348, with later outbreaks), this epidemic stood social and economic life on its ear. After plague carried off a third of the population of Europe—more in crowded cities like London—labor grew scarce, threatening the cherished privileges of the aristocracy and the Church. At the same time, talented professionals like Chaucer himself began to blur the line between commoner and aristocrat in one direction and, because the Church no longer held a monopoly on learning, between commoner and cleric in the other.

In the second half of the century worries associated with the social and economic implications of these developments brought a backlash from the propertied interests—who tried to curb the new independence of those beneath them—and a violent counterbacklash in the form of the 1358 Jacquerie uprising in France and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England, when Wat Tyler and his rebels marched on London and beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Tower, only a short walk from where Chaucer lived at the time.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES

With all the turmoil of his times swirling around him Chaucer could easily have been a different writer, wringing his hands in uncertainty or looking

for targets to rail against. In fact he is nothing like that. In place of uncertainty, he appears to have been exhilarated by the new possibilities in the air. Instead of combativeness, he seems eager to take characters at their own estimate. Located between commoners and aristocrats, moving between high culture on the one hand and tax receipts on the other, interested in everything along the way, familiar with the classics, but also popular English literature and contemporary trends in France and Italy, he became one of the most inventive and unpredictable writers in the English canon, and this is nowhere more evident than in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Start anywhere you like and Chaucer surprises you. His idea of a series of tales within a frame narrative was not new, but only he would think to draw the tale-tellers from all over England and from a variety of economic and social classes, giving his stories and narrative framework a vitality and social relevance no other collection approaches. The first Canterbury story, "The Knight's Tale," is a courtly romance, but its stylized action and noble sentiments—fine as they are—are followed immediately by a racy fabliau (a comic story of everyday life) that the Miller insists on telling out of order. While there is no way of knowing for sure how Chaucer meant to arrange the tales, it is probable that many of them would have arisen from outbursts between individual pilgrims like the Wife's quarrel with the Friar or the Miller's feud with the Reeve.

Chaucer writes in prose and poetry, using couplets, rime royal, ballade stanzas, and other verse forms in eight-syllable to ten-syllable lines. His stories range from fabliaux to saints' lives, from beast fable to courtly romance, from the popular jingle of "Sir Thopas" to the Parson's monumental sermon. Even more diverse are the modes and conventions found *within* the tales: dialogue, set speeches, myth, theology, biblical and classical allusions, natural and allegorical description, dreams, visions, astronomy, alchemical recipes, philosophical arguments, and insults, to name a few. Sometimes Chaucer goes out of his way to upset readers' expectations, as he does in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," a notably un-Arthurian Arthurian romance in which fighting ability is irrelevant, women hold all the power, and ideas count more than actions. Variety is everywhere, from the burgeoning springtime setting to the shifting scenes along the pilgrims' route to the exchanges among the pilgrims themselves and the complex play of different viewpoints between their tales. The Monk's dismal stream of tragedies is cut off not just because it is depressing but also because it saws away at the same theme. No author since Ovid valued variety as highly as Chaucer or was so ingenious at injecting it into his work.

Griselda is a monstrously long-suffering wife; the Wife of Bath will butt heads with anyone. Husbands can be sweet and understanding, or they can box you on the ear. The Church is God's kingdom on earth for the Parson or Saint Cecilia, or a flagrant swindle in the hands of the Summoner or the Pardoner. Humans have free will in one place but are bound by God's foreknowledge in another. What they think is based sometimes on the stars, sometimes on the state of their bowels. They range from unthinking hedonists like Alison in "The Miller's Tale" to stern pillars of morality like Virginius in the Physician's. The Clerk is steeped in book knowledge; the Cook seems utterly unlearned. The Parson is a saint; the Shipman a murderous pirate. Chaucer's imagination contains them all, and he considers all their tales worth retelling, refusing to be bound by any one poetic style or philosophical vision.

With few exceptions Chaucer seems more concerned to understand his characters than to judge them. Even a charlatan like the Pardoner is called "a fine ecclesiast," because he no doubt appeared no less than that in his own eyes. There is irony in such descriptions, as when the narrator tells us how the generous Friar paid for the weddings of girls he had debauched, but there is generally a note of fellow-feeling too. For all his deplorable opportunism, the Friar's eyes sparkle with the joy of life. Listening to the Wife of Bath's story of her life shows us with perfect clarity how she became what she is. Even the repellent January in "The Merchant's Tale" can see that his obsession with May is irrational, and when he discovers her in the pear tree with Damian he lets out a cry "as mothers do when babies die." No one who lived through the plague years could have made that comparison without feeling a degree of compassion for the wicked old sensualist.

All this diversity and the lifelike roundness of his characters define Chaucer's sort of realism, a poetic vision especially in tune with a time when old assumptions were passing away, hurried along by skeptical thinkers like Wycliffe and Ockham. Ockham in particular thought human minds impose a system of meanings on things that may or may not correspond to what they really are. Particular rocks and houses and trees exist. But they would exist as well if they were called something else and thought of some other way. The categories "rock," "house," and "tree" are human inventions, and so, of course, are all institutions, which would include things such as monarchies and organized religion. Grant Ockham's arguments and the implications for any entrenched form of government or special privilege are enormous. Longstanding customs mean nothing. Social arrangements and beliefs might just as well be reinvented every other week. Experience, not received opinions, is the touchstone of truth. For Ockham, the world order,

which had occupied much of medieval philosophy, is a mere construct, far less interesting than the individual beings within it.

While there is no evidence that Chaucer knew Ockham's work, there is often a similar spirit in *The Canterbury Tales*. The old hag in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" comes close to Ockham when she insists that nobility means acting nobly *yourself*, not just occupying a slot in a system that declares you noble. In the same vein, *old* and *poor* and *mean* are merely words society has come to condemn. Look at the realities they represent, she says, and they may be worthy of celebration instead.

Chaucer's pilgrims are types—the Knight, the Monk, the Summoner, and so on—and sometimes little more than that. Everything he says about the Yeoman or the Franklin, for instance, is rooted in conventional stereotypes. But other figures, including some of his most notable ones, are so individual it is as if the type were being shattered from within to let a real person rise out of it. The secretive Reeve indulges himself, out of character, with an especially good horse. Chaucer also reveals that the Reeve was trained as carpenter and that his disposition is remarkably vengeful and smutty, anticipated details that make him a person, not just a reve. The spaces between the Wife of Bath's teeth may be a conventional sign of lechery, but who would have guessed her incessant talking, which is part of the antifeminist caricature of a merlesome woman, would be driven by a respectable degree of learning, which is not?

Chaucer's diversity and realism come through just as clearly in his style, or rather his styles, for his language is beautifully responsive to his matter, so that, to take the opening of "The Nun's Priest's Tale," for example, he can sound like a dispassionate sociologist talking about a needy widow:

She kept three sows, for breed, not slaughter,  
And three thin cows and Moll, the sheep.  
Her house was sooty, hard to keep.

From this dry treatment he passes seamlessly to sympathetic irony:

And there she served, despite her wishes,  
No piquant sauce nor far-fetched dishes.  
No dainty morsels passed her throat;

To a mock-heroic celebration of Chanticleer, the cock:

His voice outdid the ample organ  
That rang out when the Mass began.

To the language of scientific objectivity:

He knew the stations of each sphere  
Above that town throughout the year.

To a parody of the avid descriptions of the heroes in popular romances:

His comb was red as brightest coral  
And scalloped like a castle wall.

It would be hard to name another writer (though once again Ovid comes to mind) whose poetic voice moves so deftly between different registers.

## OTHER WORKS

Though little in Chaucer's life records hints that he was a poet, he must always have had a project or two going on throughout his adult life. He needed to have in order to compile such a distinguished literary record while also pursuing a government career that would have been a full life's work by itself.

Around 1370, when he was about thirty, Chaucer translated part of one of the most influential works of the time, *The Romance of the Rose*, an unfinished allegory of courtly love by the French writer Guillaume de Lorris. The same period gave birth to *The Book of the Duchess*, a dream-vision elegy based on the death of Blanche of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's first wife, in 1368.

In the later 1370s it is likely Chaucer wrote the story of Saint Cecilia that became "The Second Nun's Tale" and also some of the tragedies rehearsed by the Monk. *The House of Fame*, another dream-vision poem, also dates from the 70s, and so does *Aneliida and Artime*, an unfinished narrative set in ancient Thebes.

The 1380s saw Chaucer complete *The Parliament of Fowls*, a dream-vision of birds discussing the nature of love and perhaps a tribute to young Richard II's marriage in 1382. "The Knight's Tale" also dates from this period, along with the unfinished *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer's first poem in iambic pentameter couplets.

But Chaucer's signal achievement of the 80s was *Troilus and Criseyde*, his greatest single poem—over 8,000 lines of rhyme royal stanzas on infatuation, morality, betrayal, and free will that also manages to be a brilliant narrative of events associated with the Trojan War. No one has ever written



## THE GENERAL PROLOGUE



When April's fruitful rains descend  
And bring the droughts of March to end,  
Bathing each vine in such sweet showers,  
That young buds burst and unfurl flowers,  
When West Wind too, with his mild airs  
Inspires in fields and hidden lairs  
Fresh-minted leaves, and when the sun  
Halway toward the Bull has run;  
When small birds sing for all they're worth,  
Wide-eyed all night with reckless mirth,  
Mad for love in trees and hedges,  
Why, then folks go on pilgrimages  
And pilgrims yearn for foreign strands  
And distant shrines in sundry lands.  
In England, from every plot or skerry,  
They make their way to Canterbury,  
Seeking the shrine of great Saint Thomas,  
To pay for sins or keep a promise.

*the constellation Taurus*

10.

And thus in Southwark one spring day  
At the Tabard, where I lay,  
Ready to journey from the place  
And seek the holy martyr's grace,  
A merry group arrived to dine,  
A mounted crowd of twenty-nine.  
Pilgrims all of every station,  
And every corner of the nation,  
Riding toward Saint Thomas' shrine.  
The rooms were good, the food was fine,  
The fires were warm, the wine went round,  
And by the time the sun was down,  
I had agreed with every one  
To join their fellowship anon.  
The next day we'd begin at dawn,

*across the Thames from London*

20

The tale I'll tell you further on.

But first grant me a little space  
Before I stir another pace,  
To set forth, as an author should,  
The qualities, both bad and good,  
These pilgrims showed a man like me,  
What each one was, of what degree,  
Even the outis that they rode in,  
And with a knight I will begin.

40

A KNIGHT was there, a worthy man,  
That from the time he first began,  
Devoted himself to chivalry  
And truth and blameless courtesy,  
His name was held in high repute  
In every camp without dispute.  
In every pagan or Christian nation  
He won the greatest acclamation.  
He watched as Alexandria fell,  
Presided at the citadel,

50

*Lithuania*

First knight among the troops in Prussia,  
And fought in Lettow and in Russia,  
The hardiest man of his degree.  
He smote the Moors with savagery  
In hot assaults from southern Spain  
To the parched Moroccan plain.  
From western seas to Turkish towns,  
He followed war with great renown,  
Attending fifteen mortal broils.<sup>3</sup>  
In Africa for Christ, and spoils,  
He met picked champions of the Alcoran  
Three times and always killed his man.  
Once he upheld a Turkish lord  
Against another pagan's horde,  
With no loss to his reputation.

60

3. Chaucer mentions here a number of other places where the Knight had campaigned (Granada and Algeciras in Spain; Ayash, Atalia, and Balar in Turkey; and Benmarin [Morocco] and Tlemcen in North Africa). He means to show that the Knight has fought on all three fronts facing Western Europe in the 14th century: in the Baltic States with the Teutonic Knights facing forces from the east, in the Middle East confronting Islam, and in North Africa and Spain warring against the Moors.

Yet he made little of his station.  
As meek and mild as any maid,  
He practiced no deceit nor said  
Insulting words or words of spite.  
He was a true and perfect knight,  
Nor overweening or contentious.  
His horse was good but unpretentious.  
He wore a shirt of homespun stuff,  
Armor-rusty, coarse, and rough,  
For he had lately been abroad  
And rode to make his peace with God.

Beside him rode his son and SQUIRE

A lovesome, lusty bachelor,

Whose locks were crisped as in a press—

Some twenty years of age I guess.

His build was of the middling sort,

Well knit and apt for every sport,

He too had been in chivalry

In northern France and Picardy,

And served well in that little space

To win a certain lady's grace.

In robes like meadows, as we said,

Picked out in flowers of white and red,

He sang and whistled all the day,

As fresh as is the month of May.

His gown was short; its cut was fair.

He sat his horse without a care,

Inventing songs and poems at will,

A handy lad with lance or quill,

A lover too, warm blooded, hale,

And sleepless as a nightingale.

Yet he was courteous. He knew his part,

And served his knight with courtly art.

A YEOMAN, their subordinate

(They fared abroad with little state),

Went with them in a hood of green.

A sheath of arrows, bright and keen,

Rode at his belt, beside his hand.

There was no yeoman in the land

Whose tackle made a finer show,

70

80

90

100

From polished straps to mighty bow.  
 Short-cropped hair, a creased, brown face,  
 A horse well suited to the chase,  
 An archer's guard upon his arm,  
 A sword and shield to ward off harm,  
 A silver dagger on his haunch,  
 To part a joint or rip a paunch,  
 A Christopher upon on his breast,  
 A horn, a baldric, and the rest,  
 Proclaimed him woodsman, and the best.

*Saint Christopher medal*

110

A nun there was, a PRIORESS,

Her smiling seemed a harmless folly,  
 Her strongest oath was "gosh" or "golly."  
 They called her Madame Eglantine,  
 And claimed her singing was divine,  
 Tuned through her nose with elegance.

120

*name suited to a heroine of romance*

She used the tongue and airs of France,  
 But used them with outlandish features,  
 As taught to her by English teachers.  
 At meals she coyly sipped or nibbled,  
 And never missed her mouth nor dribbled.  
 Her fingers barely skimmed her sauce,  
 Transporting food without a loss  
 To slide or trickle down her chest,  
 And mar the manners she professed.

130

She wiped her lips with such great pain  
 That in her cup no drop remained  
 Of grease when she had sipped a drink.  
 Her grace made common people shrink!  
 Behaving well with such facility,  
 She seemed far nobler than nobility,  
 All dignity, the height of fashion.  
 But let me mention her compassion:  
 Holding all God's creatures dear,  
 She could not watch without a tear  
 A mouse, even, if she saw it suffer.  
 Her lap dogs' lives were scarcely rougher,  
 She fed them roast and fine white loaves,  
 And wept if one should die, or oafs  
 Walloped it and made it smart—

140

All conscience and a tender heart.  
 Her wimple styled the latest way,  
 A well-formed nose and eyes of gray,  
 A dainty mouth, pursed soft and red,  
 And over them a broad forehead—  
 About a hand's-breadth wide, I own.  
 You'd hardly call her undergrown.  
 Her cloak was soft and finely napped;  
 And round about her arm was wrapped  
 A rosary of coral and green.  
 Its golden brooch, fit for a queen,  
 Showed a proud, crowned *A* without a flaw,  
 Then *Amor vincit omnia*.

*"Love conquers all."*

With her came her secretary,  
 And three tame priests to fetch and carry,  
 A forceful MONK rode near the front,  
 A chief and master of the hunt,  
 A manly man, fit for an abbot,  
 But horseman first by choice and habit.  
 His bridle's jingling was as clear  
 And sounded sweetly on the ear  
 As church bells tolling to the people  
 Around his little chapel's steeple.  
 The holy Rule of Benedict,  
 Because he thought it somewhat strict,  
 This Monk was eager to renounce  
 And live instead among his mouns.  
 He wouldn't bet a half-plucked hen  
 That hunters aren't holy men  
 Or that a monk who hunts and shoots  
 Is pointless as a fish in boots—  
 That is, a monk out of his cloister.  
 Such maxims aren't worth an oyster.  
 I found his logic ironclad;  
 Why should he study and go mad,  
 Through ceaseless reading in his cell,  
 Or work until he grew unwell,  
 As Augustine bids? What a dunce!

150

170

180

4. A secular motto that could also have a religious meaning.

Let Augustine labor if he wants!  
This Monk rode with all his might.

His hounds were swift as birds in flight.  
At his pet pasture, hunting hare,

There was no outlay he would spare.  
His sleeves were lined, and warm as felt,

With the finest squirrel pelts.  
To gather his hood beneath his chin,

He wore a well-wrought golden pin.  
This love knot held the fabric fast.

His head was bald and shown like glass,  
As did his features, red and gleaming.

He was full fat and heavy seeming,  
With glaring eyes, a bit bloodshot,

Fierce as the fire beneath a pot.  
His proud steed, preening like a pigeon,

Did further credit to religion.  
This Monk was no one's bloodless ghost,

A fat swan was his favorite roast.  
His horse was brown as any berry.

A FRIAR there was, wanton and merry,  
A beggar of most rare dispatch.

No friar anywhere could match  
The way he flattered girls and flirted,

Made free with them and then diverted  
Funds to wed them at his expense.

He was a man of consequence,  
Well beloved and widely known

In neighborhoods he called his own.  
On wives he made a great impression

For he had power of confession,  
Far greater than a lesser cleric,

A brand-name shriver, not generic.  
He'd crown the grossest peccadilloes,

With admonitions soft as pillows  
And a gentle penance at the close

If you were rich, for Heaven knows,  
Fat offerings against perdition

Bespeak a most sincere contrition.  
A penitent dispensing alms

190

200

210

220

Earned this Friar's smoothest balms.  
For many have a stony heart

And cannot weep although they smart,  
And therefore in default of weeping,

Place silver in the Church's keeping.  
This Friar's hood was packed with knives

And pins to offer pretty wives,  
And he could sing and strum a chord

To start a dance or please a lord.  
His ballads brimmed with piquancy.

His neck was white as fleurs-de-lys.  
Bullish as a champion,

He knew the bars in every town  
And thought more of a tavern schlep

Than any homeless wretch or leper,  
For such a worthy man as he,

In keeping with his dignity,  
Must hold himself above the gutters

In every act and word he utters.  
Fie on the sickly, unwashed hordes!

Give him the moneyed class and lords.  
That was where his profit lay.

He filled his role in every way,  
Begging well enough to be

Awarded by his friary  
A rich, exclusive territory,

A princely mendicant signore.  
A widow without board or barren

Encountering his euphonious Latin,  
Would give, despite her indigence.

His income trebled his expense.  
And he could gambol like a pup,

Step in and make a quarrel up.  
He was no skinny anchorite

Nor shared a scholar's squalid plight.  
No, he went proudly like a pope.

Of double worsted was his cope,  
Creased like a bell from careful pressing.

He lisped to sound more prepossessing  
And mince the English on his tongue.

230

240

250

260

I noticed when he harped or sung,  
His eyes shewn from his head as bright  
As stars do on a frosty night.

Huberd was this worthy's name.

Next a bearded MERCHANT came;

270

In parti-colored clothes he sat,  
Beneath a Flemish beaver hat.

His boots were of the finest sort,

His proclamations round and short

And mostly of the deals he made

And growing threats to foreign trade

Up and down the English coast.

A financier, to hear him boast,

His eyes were turned beyond the seas

Manipulating currencies

280

And leveraged debts and deals in kind.

No one could sound his bottom line.

He was a worthy man, I guess.

I missed his name, though, I confess.

There was an Oxford CLERK as well,

A logic student unexcelled,

Astride a horse built like a rake

And lean, himself, as any snake,

Hollow looking, a bit remote.

All threadbare was his overcoat.

290

He had no sinecure in Kent,

Parish ladies, lands to rent,

But lined up books around his bed

Twenty tomes in black and red,

Of sober Aristotle's teaching.

No fancy robes or fiddle screeching.

He relished only ancient learning

Although it rarely led to earning.

The piteances his friends provided

He spent on books, although they chided,

And prayed for them in shrines and churches,

For underwriting his researches.

With all those axioms in his head,

He seldom looked about or said

A needless word, but still you knew

300

That he had thought things through and through.  
Careful reading shaped his speech.

He was glad to learn and glad to teach.

A MAN OF LAW was on our jaunt,

Well known in every lawyer's haunt,

A fount of ancient legal fables,

To tie up courts with lawyers' quibbles.

His wit was deepest, opinions wisest,

A frequent justice of assizes

By royal appointment and commission.

His standing and his great ambition

Brought streams of gold in gleaming spate

Which he deployed in real estate.

Confronting such a legal idol,

No one would dare dispute his titles.

He made the air around him buzz,

Yet seemed far busier than he was.

He knew each law and precedent,

How it applied, and what it meant,

Since William's reign—each lawyers' fix

Dating to 1066.

No instrument this man dictated

Had ever been invalidated.

He rode in a silk-belted coat

With stripes, but nothing else of note.

Beside the lawyer rode a FRANKLIN,

A snow-white beard adorned his chin.

With ruddy cheeks and shining head,

He broke his fast with wine and bread.

He'd long enjoyed a life luxurious,

For he had found with Epicurus,

Abundant pleasure, not simplicity,

The truest measure of felicity.

A potentate in his locality

And patron saint of hospitality,

His bread and ale were unsurpassed,

The holdings of his cellar vast.

His table groaned with smoking dishes

Of roasted game and seasoned fishes.

The house snowed first-rate meat and drink.

310

320

330

a prosperous landowner

340

15

With delicacies to make you blink,  
 Pegged to the season of the year,  
 From berry pies to autumn deer.  
 He raised fat partridges in runs  
 And served up perch and pikes well done.

Woe to the cook if the sauce was bland:  
 "Hot and sharp!" was his command.  
 His board stayed mounted in the hall  
 Spread like a food seller's stall.

As local justice, he'd been sent  
 By his home shire to Parliament.  
 A short sword and a purse of silk  
 Hung at his belt as white as milk.

A sheriff once, and court commissioner,  
 He was his borough's prime parishioner.

A CARPENTER and a TRUNKET BUYER,  
 Two WEAVERS, and a PIECE-GOODS DYER,  
 Rode solemnly and finely horsed  
 In livery their guilds endorsed.

Each item of their gear was new,  
 With finest silver, bright as dew,  
 Their knives were trimmed and pouches filled.  
 Each one was burgherhood distilled.

They knew each scrap of local trade,  
 Sat in their merchants' hall and weighed  
 The latest deals, who lost or won,  
 Each rumbling like an alderman.

Their properties and rents spread wide;  
 Their wives surveyed the town with pride.  
 And well they should. They knew their worth.  
 Ladies by custom if not by birth,

They ruled at large in their domains,  
 With serving boys to bear their trains.

A COOK was there, the very man  
 To braise a chicken in a pan  
 With marrow bones and sweet-sour spices,  
 Or quaff, left to his own devices,  
 Good London ale, or poach or fry,  
 Or heat a hash or bake a pie.  
 He had, although it seemed a sin,

350

360

370

380

A runny ulcer on his shin,  
 For his white mouses were the best.

There was a SHIPMAN from the west  
 From Dartmouth or nearby, I guessed.

Bouncing on a low-bred nag,  
 His wool gown drooping like a bag,  
 His knife hung from a sailor's lanyard,  
 And he was as brown as any Spaniard  
 Where the sun had burned his skin—  
 A thruster with a wolfish grin,

The first upon his ship who crept  
 To sample the wine while the shipper slept.

Remorselessly, beneath the waves,  
 He sent sea captives to their graves.

He knew the lore of winds and tides,  
 And currents, rocks, and reefs besides,

Harbors, moons, and navigation,  
 No better man in any nation.

He faced the blackest storms at sea  
 With perfect equanimity,

No sea-borne danger made him falter  
 From Oslo down beyond Gibraltar.

Each inlet town from France to Spain  
 Had seen his ship, the *Magdelaine*.

Next came a prominent PHYSICIAN,  
 A proper medical patrician.

His dosages and surgery  
 Were grounded in astrology.

In fact, he treated all his cases  
 By the stars' great wheeling traces,

Interpreting the sky's aspect  
 With charts and figures to detect

The hidden causes of each malady,  
 Whether hot or cold or moist or dry,

Where it grew and what it fed on,  
 So he could stop its progress head on.

When he knew the cause for sure,  
 He'd prescribe the proper cure,

And if the patient was unwarry,  
 He'd also pick the apothecary.

390

400

410

420



For years they'd greased each other's palms  
With graft and kickbacks, merchant's alms.  
Aesculapius, Dioscorides,

He knew the best authorities,

Each pill purveying theory spinner

From Hippocrates to Avicenna,

Through every modern theory, thus

Down to Gilbertus Anglicus.

Seldom lavish at his meat,

This doctor's food was plain and neat,  
Moderate dishes, healthful, fit.

He took no joy in Holy Writ.

His clothes matched any of our crew's,

Rich raffer as in reds and blues.

Yet he'd got most of them for fire

From sufferers, to settle fees.

440

Gold is good for many an ill,  
So he sought gold with all his skill.

A WIFE OF BATH rode in the crowd,

Half deaf, unless your voice was loud.

The trade she drove in woven stuffs

Surpassed the Belgians right enough.

No wife, however fond of glory,

Preceded her to Offertory,

Or if one did, then she would vow

An awful vengeance on the cow.

Her coverchiefs would weigh, when starched,

Ten pounds apiece and grandly arched

Each Sunday high above her head.

Her stockings were of scarlet red,

Shaping the calves above her shoes.

Her looks were bold and ruddy too.

Her taste for fights and bold carouses

Had quite undone her first five spouses

And sundry boyfriends in her youth.

(To mention these would be uncouth.)

On three trips to the Holy Land,

She mastered hardships like a man.

She'd gone to Rome and to Boulogne,

Galicia and then Cologne.

460

*two thousand years' worth of medical*

*luminaries from Greece*

*(Aesculapius and Dioscorides)*

*to England (Gilbertus*

*Anglicus)*

*famous cloth makers*

*the offering at Mass*

450

*pilgrimage sites*

Love was her life's leitmotif,

As shown by gaps between her teeth.

Upon an ambling horse she sat,

Wimpled well beneath a hat

As broad as any soldier's shield.

Below her waist a robe revealed

Sharp, gleaming spurs. She was

A boon companion, but one with claws,

And knew as well as any dance

Each stage and gambit of romance.

A PARSON of a town came next,

Poor in gold, but one suspects

Richer than most in holy works.

He was a learned man, a clerk.

Deep gospel-love informed his preaching,

And daily life and moral teaching.

He was benign and diligent,

Even tempered and content,

Though life for him was seldom blithe.

He'd curse no one who couldn't tithes,

But gave out food and clothes and more—

All that he could to help the poor—

Drawn from the Church and his own savings.

Long temperance had quelled his cravings.

Although his flock was widely scattered,

Storms or distance never mattered:

Near or far, great or small,

He'd visit anyone at all,

Tramping on foot the direst traces.

He put things in their proper places,

For, "First he wrought, and then he taught

Because the Gospel said he ought."

He had another motto too:

"If gold rusts, what will iron do?"

If a priest is foul, with souls in trust,

Why should a layman curb his lust?

This sight must make the angels weep:

A shepherd shiver than his sheep.

A priest's commitment should be ample

To lead his people by example.

*a mark of lechery*

470

480

490

500

This Parson never hired a curate  
To tend his parish and secure it,  
While he himself besieged the Church  
For an easy job that he could shirk  
Or a post as chaplain to some guild.

510

No, he strayed home to watch and build  
Against the wolf, lest sheep miscarry,  
A shepherd, not a mercenary.  
But though a priest of sterling worth,  
He spurned no other man on earth  
Nor took a domineering tone.  
Indeed, his fellow-feeling shown  
In every word, for saving souls  
Was always first among his goals.  
But faced with hardened, stiff-necked scoffers,  
However placed or full their coffers,  
He'd prick their wicked hides, I'm bound.  
No better parson could be found,  
A lowly man and free from vice,  
Not finely dressed nor over-nice,  
But like Christ's humble first attendants,  
In Heaven's light he shown resplendent.

520

Next came a PLOWMAN, the Parson's brother,  
Who shoveled dung like any other.  
An honest laborer was he,  
Living in peace and charity.

530

He worshipped God with all he had  
On all occasions, good or bad,  
And loved his neighbors selflessly.  
He had no faults that I could see,  
For he would freely plow and more  
For Christ alone to aid the poor,  
He paid his tithes without a question,  
Ten percent of his possessions.  
He wore a smock with ragged sleeves.

540

Next came MILLER and a REEVE,  
A SUMMONER, a PARDONER,  
A MANCIPIE, and, at the rear,  
Myself, the last of all the party.  
The MILLER was both stout and hearty.

He used his brawn and piston thighs  
In wrestling and won each prize.  
He was broad, short-shouldered, thick—  
Unhinging doors was his pet trick,  
Or breaking through them with his head!  
His outspread beard was foxy red  
And broad and solid as a spade.  
The skin upon his nose had made  
A wart, crowned with a tuft of hairs,  
Red as the bristles in an old sow's ears.  
His nostrils were hairy, black, and wide.  
He bore a short sword at his side.  
His mouth gaped open like a cauldron,  
Spewing language that appalled one,  
All japes of sin and hardiety.  
He doubled every rightful fee  
And weighed out flour with a golden thumb.  
In white and blue clothes, all and some,  
He clamped a bagpipe between his lips  
And led us forward on our trip.

550

The MANCIPIE labored, by report,  
Purchasing goods for an Inn of Court,  
A model man in these affairs,  
Buying food or wine or wares  
In such a wily, complex fashion,  
He always got his private ration.  
Now isn't it an act of God,  
When such a plain, untutored clod  
Can balk a canny, learned crew?  
For all his thirty masters knew  
Every law from A to Z.  
Most were fit to keep the keys  
And deftly manage large estates  
For any lord, however great,  
And make him dwell within his means  
And pay his debts and cool his spleen,  
To live as sparsely as they said—  
Or they could lead a shire instead  
Through any crises or mishaps—  
And yet this scamp set all their caps!

*That is, he used his thumb  
to depress the scales.*

560

*one of several legal societies  
in London*

570

580

The choleric REEVE was next to pass.  
He scraped his cheeks as smooth as glass  
And trimmed his hair on front and sides,  
Like a poor priest's coil down to the hide.  
His legs were lean as any staff,  
Straight sticks without a trace of calf.

590

His record keeping was arcane,  
So no one else could count his gains,  
Transforming nature's starts and stops  
To meat and hay and milk and crops.  
Whole herds of cows and other stock  
From sheep to pigs and poultry flocks  
Were solely in this steward's hands.  
All things had run at his commands,  
Since his lord came of age at twenty.  
No one had seen him steal a penny.  
No underling on his estate  
Could hoodwink him. He ruled their fate,  
And kept them honest out of fear.

600

He owned a fine house standing near  
Upon a stately, shaded plot.  
He could afford it. His lord could not.  
He hoarded up his secret riches,  
And sometimes scratched his lordship's itches  
With funds he skimmed from the estate;  
Or else he let the young lord wait.  
In youth he'd learned a trade aright,  
He was a carpenter, a wood wright.  
He rode a stylish dappled gray  
Named Scot. This was his one display.  
His surcoat was a dark blue shade,  
Hung with a poor, rust-pitted blade.

610

A man of Norfolk, as I heard tell,  
Near a town called Baldeswell,  
He tucked his skirts up like a friar,  
And trailed behind in this attire.

620

The SUMMONER with us in that place  
Bore a fire-red cherub's face  
With raging acne, puffy eyes,  
A flaring lecher by his guise.

*Character's reference here is obscure.*

His scaling brows and scabby beard  
Made up a visage children feared.  
No lead-based salve or keen arrar—  
Brimstone, borax, cream of tartar—  
No paste with sharp astringent bite  
Could tame his pimples, red and white,  
Or dry the pustules on his cheeks.

630

He lived on garlic, onions, leeks,  
And wine as strong and red as rubies—  
Too strong at least for this poor booby—  
For when the wine had seized his reins  
Scraps of Latin filled his brains,  
He knew some terms, just two or three,  
That he had plucked from some decree,  
Words he encountered every day.  
(Of course you know a brainless jay  
Can call out "Walter" like the pope.)  
But then he soon ran out of rope.  
We saw his lack of wit for sure as

640

He bawled his nonsense rag, "*Quid iustus?*"  
He was a loose, confiding fellow,  
A veteran barfly, kind and mellow;  
For no more than a quart of wine,  
He'd let you keep a concubine  
Twelve months and then excuse you for it.

650

He liked himself to pluck a puller.  
As he would tell his fellow sinners,  
Fear of the Church is for beginners  
Unless your soul is in your purse,  
For gifts will trump a deacon's curse.  
"You pay to play," was his pet line.  
At worst you'd pay a church court's fine.  
(But I rejected all he said.  
Myself, I hold the Church in dread.  
Church curses are the spirit's bane!  
Church courts can lock you up in chains!)  
He kept young girls beneath his thumb.  
They did his will to keep him mum,  
For he could publicize each sin.  
Now strong ale made him reel and grin.

660

*"Which law [applies here]?"*

A tavern garland crowned his head;  
He bore a shield, a loaf of bread.

Beside him rode a PARDONER

Of Rouncivale, his friend and peer.

This man, though lately come from Rome,

Sang all the latest songs from home.

The Summoner caught the beat and thumped it,

And sang along, loud as a trumpet.

This Pardoner's hair was pale like wax

And hung as limp as beaten flax,

Spreading across his back in hanks,

Damp, oily locks, and stringy ranks.

Though it was thinning, he was vain;

He wore no hood in sun or rain,

But rode uncovered mile on mile

In what he thought the latest style.

His head was bare but for a cap.

His glaring eyes would dart and snap.

His badge recalled Veronica's veil.

His wallet bulged like a pouch of mail,

Brim full with pardons signed and sealed.

His fluting treble voice revealed,

A girlish nature. He never shaved

And never had to. He behaved

Much like a gelding or a mare.

Still, in his pardoner's craft nowhere

Was anyone with more audacity.

A pillowcase, by his mendacity,

Became Our Blessed Mother's veil.

He had a piece of that same sail

Saint Peter raised the day he tried

To walk the sea at Jesus' side.

He rattled a brass cross full of stones

And a fusty jar of moldy bones.

With tools like these to gain him entry

He fleeced the country dods and gentry,

Clearing enough in just one day

To match two months of parson's pay.

His lurid talk and phony treasures

Made money flow in at his pleasure.

*a religious institution in London*

670

*with its image of Christ*

680

690

700

For one of his distrusted caste,

He was a fine ecclesiast,

A great hand for a psalm or story,

Still better singing Offertory.

Because he knew when this was done

It would be time to file his tongue

And preach to win a great oblation,

He sang with rare anticipation.

And so I have described for you

The state and nature of our crew—

How we met and joined to ride

From Southwark by the mild Thames' side

At the Tabard, near the Bell.

Now it's time for me to tell

All the plans we settled on

Before we left the inn at dawn.

And then I'll undertake to say

What fell to us along the way.

But first, I beg your courtesy:

Good friends, don't count it villainy

If I speak plainly in my tale;

I have to, or my work will fail!

I must convey the things I heard

And tell my stories word for word.

An author who is conscientious

Must be objective, not tendentious.

Every word must be related

Or he can justly be berated

For telling lies or feigning matters,

Leaving honest truth in tatters.

He must spare no one, not his brother,

Noble pa, or saintly mother.

Christ himself spoke plainly in

Holy writ, condemning sin.

Plato adds, if you can read,

Words must be brother to the deed.

To head off other criticism,

I'm hardly preaching social schism

By putting pilgrims out of order.

I'm not their marshal—just recorder.

720

730

740

96

Our HOST drew us into accord  
As we assembled round his board  
With food and smiles, a nod, a wink,  
And all the wine we cared to drink.  
A seemly man in form and feature,  
The perfect after-dinner speaker.

750

He ran the house to suit his whims,  
The finest landlord on the Thames—  
The life and breath of any party,  
Bold and witty, warm and hearty,  
And in all ways a merry man.  
Just after supper he began,

When we had paid our reckonings,  
To speak of mirth and other things,  
And said, "Now, gentle people all,  
You're surely welcome in this hall.  
I tell you, and I never lie,

760

I've seen no finer company  
Assembled this year at my inn.  
Seldom have my feelings been  
So well engaged. Now, if I might,  
Let me propose a plan tonight.

"You go to Canterbury—good, Godspeed;  
Saint Thomas help you in your need!

But nothing makes the way seem short  
Like travelers' games or other sport;

770

All it takes to make you drag  
Is sitting dumbly like a bag  
Of senseless rocks. Ah, you agree!

Why then, my friends, attend to me,  
Pledge one and all to join my plan,  
And put yourselves at my command.  
If you do everything I say,

780

Tomorrow, riding on your way,  
I swear by my dead father's name,  
You'll think this journey's just a game.  
Show your hands if you assent!"

We gave unanimous consent.  
No one wanted to debate it.  
We were too jolly and elated,

And begged him to expound his scheme.  
"Friends," he said, "I'd never dream  
Of drawing out my words in vain.  
I'll say my piece both short and plain.

Swear each of you will tell two tales  
Along the Canterbury trail;  
Two more as you come back again.

Four tales won't tax the lightest brain;  
Just tell of old things from the past.  
The pilgrim we shall judge at last

790

Preminent in storytelling—  
The one whose tale is most compelling—  
Will have a supper at our cost,  
'Our' meaning all the folks who lost.  
The journey finished, by Our Lord,  
We'll reassemble at my board.

And with you I myself will ride;  
I'll pay my way and be your guide.  
Anyone refusing my behests  
Must bear the costs for all the rest.  
Tomorrow, if this concord suits,  
We'll all set out along your route."

800

We relished all he said and swore.  
That done, we asked him one thing more:  
That he would oversee the contest,  
Assign the tales, judge which was best,  
And set the winner's bill of fare.

810

We would honor, for our share,  
All his commands. Thus by accord  
We took our landlord at his word.  
More wine was brought. We shared a toast.

Each pledged the others and our Host,  
And then we yawned our way to bed.  
Next morning when the east was red,  
Our wakeful Host—he was our cock—  
Drew us together in a flock,

820

And led us at an ambling pace  
Out to a pilgrims' watering place.  
There he stopped and peered around.  
"Friends," he said, "I've always found

It's best to reaffirm a contract  
The morning after. If our pact  
Survived the night, now I will name  
The first tale-teller and start our game.  
This is where your pledge commences.  
Comply, or pay the rest's expenses.

830

Draw straws, and let shortest win.  
The one who holds it will begin.  
Sir Knight," he said, "respected lord,  
Draw first to honor our accord.  
You next," he told the Prioress,  
"And then the Clerk and all the rest."  
We weren't shy, we crowded near;  
Compared our straws with lively cheer;  
And in truth, it turned out well

840

For what we wished was what befell:  
The Knight had plucked the shortest straw.  
I swear that no one rigged the draw.  
But we all thought it for the best  
The noblest man should lead the rest.  
That should be plain to anyone.  
When the knight learned he had won,  
We knew he'd do just as he should,  
And tell the finest tale he could.  
He said, "I shall begin the game,  
And nothing loath, in God's great name!  
So listen now to what I say."  
We set our horses on their way,  
As he began with pleasant cheer  
To tell his tale, as you may hear.

850

## THE KNIGHT



### THE KNIGHT'S TALE

*The Knight tells a long story based on Il Tesseida, an Italian poem of Boccaccio. The great Athenian hero Theseus has defeated the Amazons and married their queen, Hippolyte. Returning to Athens, he meets a company of Theban ladies grieving because the dictator Creon killed their husbands and will not allow the bodies to be buried.*

*Enraged, Theseus sacks Thebes, kills Creon, and returns the bones of the slain husbands to their wives. Meanwhile his pillagers find two royal cousins half alive among the wounded, the young Theban knights Palamon and Arcite (Ar-SEET). Theseus transports these two to Athens and locks them, without hope of ransom, in a tower overlooking the palace where he lives with Hippolyte and her lovely sister Emily.*

Until one blooming dawn in May  
Emily stepped forth like a queen,  
Soft white amid the garden's green,  
As fresh as any flower that grows.  
Her cheeks could match the chastest rose;  
No eye could choose between the two.  
That day, as she was used to do,  
The girl walked out to take the air,  
For May allowed no sluggards there.  
That month unlocks each gentle heart  
From winter with resistless art,  
And says, "Arise, and honor me!"  
Swift to heed sweet May's decree,  
Young Emily rose in reverence,  
And clothed herself without pretense.  
Her hair, coiled in a golden braid,  
Hung down a yard behind the maid.  
Outdoors she watched the mild sun rise

10



# THE MILLER



## THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE

No sooner was the knight's tale ended  
Than each of us proclaimed it splendid.  
We called it memorable and moving,  
Declared its noble thoughts improving,  
Especially those who ranked as gentry.  
Our Host was just as complimentary.  
"The pouch is open now," he cried.  
"Let's see what else we find inside.  
No one could wish a better start.  
Now let this Monk display his art,  
And tell a tale to top the Knight!"  
The Miller, full of drink and fight,  
Where he sat reeling in his saddle,  
Would not be ruled without a battle.  
He waved the Host's commands away  
And roared like Pilate in a play:  
"By God's arms and blood and bones,  
I'll tell *my* noble tale at once,  
And it shall quit the good Knight's tale."  
Our Host saw he was drunk with ale  
And said, "No, Robin, that's not right,  
Our betters should succeed the Knight:  
Pipe down now. Observe propriety!"  
"By God's great soul and my sobriety,"  
The Miller said, "I won't obey.  
I'll tell my tale or go my way."  
"Well, tell it then," our Host replied,  
"Since you're too drunk to be denied."  
"Listen," this Miller shouted round,  
"I'm drunk. I know it by my sound.  
If I misspeak or miss my mark,

70

## THE MILLER'S TALE

Blame it on the ale of Southwark.  
Now hear a story drawn from life  
About a carpenter and wife  
And how a clerk set both their caps!"  
Up shot the Reeve with "Shut your trap!  
Hold back your drunken harlotry.  
You sin against the bourgeoisie  
To slander honest men in game,  
And undermine a wife's good name.  
Give over. Choose another tale."  
The Miller roared back like a gale:  
"Ah, my blessed brother Oswald,  
No wifeless man can be a cuckold.  
But I don't say that you are one.  
There are good wives beneath the sun.  
For each one mucky, thousands glitter—  
Or have you reason to be bitter?  
Why sputter venom like a shrew?  
I have a wife as well as you.  
A cuckold! Not to save my ox  
Would I put myself in that box,  
Just for fear that I was one.  
No! I'll believe that I am none.  
No man should pry throughout his life  
To learn God's secrets, or his wife's.  
If you enjoy her *quelque chose*,  
Why grudge the rest, wherever it goes?"  
That illustrates this Miller's mood—  
Drunk, mean, combative, lewd.  
His story's more licentious yet.  
But I'm committed to rehearse it.  
Now, gentle reader, I implore you,  
When I put his tale before you,  
Don't think me lecherous or shameless.  
Most of my stories are quite blameless,  
But I must tell the bad ones too,  
Or shirk what I set out to do.  
Turn the page and choose another;  
My tamer tales would suit your mother.  
They praise good morals and embody

71

40

50

French: "something"

60

70

standard dramatic villain

10

20

30

23

The opposite of all things bawdy,  
 Just don't blame me for what you choose.  
 The Miller was far gone in booze,  
 A hopeless churl. So was the Reeve.  
 What else could men like these conceive  
 But sluttishness? I'm innocent.  
 So take these stories as they're meant.

## THE MILLER'S TALE

Once upon a time in Oxford  
 A tradesman offered room and board  
 To guests, a thriving carpenter.  
 A needy scholar living there,  
 Having mastered basic arts,  
 Took astrology to heart,  
 And learned, by sundry calculations,  
 To answer men's interrogations.  
 He knew on given dates and hours  
 If they would suffer droughts or showers,  
 And other things that would befall—  
 No one could ever name them all.

This clerk, called handy Nicholas,  
 Relished love and lovers' bliss,  
 But slyly worked to hide his weakness  
 And seem a blushing maid for meekness.  
 He had a chamber of his own,  
 Where he retired to be alone.  
 He hung fresh herbs in this retreat,  
 Chewed spices too, to smell more sweet.  
 Of mint or ginger root he savored  
 As on his *Almagest* he labored  
 Beside his astrolabe and books.  
 His auguring stones lay in a nook  
 Above the headboard of his bed.  
 His cupboard bore a scarf of red  
 And a hollow, jangling psaltery  
 Which filled the nights with melody.

*astronomy text*

*for predicting the future*

*stringed instrument*

*a Latin hymn*

So sweetly that his chamber rang  
 As *Angelus ad Virginem* he sang.  
 Each time he piped the song "King's Note,"  
 His housemates blessed his tuneful throat.  
 In such pursuits his time was spent,  
 With friends to help him pay the rent.

The carpenter had wed a wife,  
 And valued her above his life.

This girl was eighteen years of age,  
 And he kept her in a narrow cage,  
 For being old and full of phlegm,  
 He went in fear she'd cuckold him.  
 He'd not read Caro (his wit was rude),  
 Who said, "Wed your similitude.

Marry your own generation  
 Or live in constant trepidation."

So now his head was in the snare,  
 And he watched the girl with jealous care.

The wife was fair, as I've determined,  
 As sleek and slender as an ermine.  
 She wore a belt with stripes of silk  
 Above an apron white as milk,  
 Arranged in pleats across her thighs.  
 Her smock was white. What drew all eyes  
 Was her white collar, neatly chased  
 In coal-black stitching, interlaced  
 To match the ribbons of her cap,  
 A studied fashion, no mishap.

Her broad silk headband sat on high.  
 "Come hither" twinkled in her eye.  
 Her brows were neatly plucked and narrow,  
 Bent like bows to launch an arrow.  
 She was a finer sight to see  
 Than a slender, blooming pear tree,  
 And softer than the wool of wethers;  
 At her waist, a purse of leather  
 With silken fringe and gleaming beads.  
 No matter where your wandering leads,  
 You'll never find another such,  
 So pert a doll, so sweet to touch.

*neutered rams*

I swear her skin gave off a glint  
 As bright as coins fresh from the mint.  
 Her singing was as clear and able  
 As any swallow's on a gable.  
 She skipped as lightly as a lamb  
 That flisked and gambolled by his dam.  
 Her mouth was sweet as mead's bouquet  
 Or a hoard of apples stored in hay.  
 Skirtish as a tender colt,  
 Long as a mast, straight as a bolt.  
 She wore a brooch upon her breast  
 Broad as a shield-boss or a crest.  
 She laced her shoes up tight and high.  
 She was a primrose, a sweet pig's eye,  
 Fit for a lord to roll in bed  
 Or any lesser man to wed.

Now then, sirs, this was the case:  
 One day our handy Nicholas  
 Approached the wife to flirt and play.  
 (Her husband was at Osenay.)  
 As clerks are subtle beyond measure,  
 He briskly grabbed her nether treasure

*an abbey near Oxford*

And said, "For love of you I cry.  
 Surrender, dear, or I must die!"  
 And grappled her around the hips  
 And groaned, "Now let me kiss your lips,  
 Or I will perish by your face."

170

The girl sprang like a colt in trace.  
 She wrenched away her head with speed  
 And said, "What? Never by my creed!  
 You must unhand me Nicholas,  
 Or I will shout out 'Help! Alas!'  
 You mustn't grope me in this way!"  
 But Nicholas moaned "Welladay!"  
 And spoke so sweetly and so fast  
 That she relented at the last  
 And swore by holy martyred Thomas  
 She'd comfort him. She'd keep the promise  
 When she saw an open field.  
 "My husband's jealous eye is peeled,"

180

*round ornament on a shield*

*flowers*

150

She said, "Take care! Tiptoe with dread;  
 If we're discovered, sweet, I'm dead!  
 You must be stealthy in this case."

"Of course I will," said Nicholas.  
 "A clerk has but himself to blame  
 If he can't win a thinking game  
 Against a woodwright." So they agreed  
 To wait their chance to do the deed.

190

Once Nicholas knew that she'd be kind,  
 He ran his hands up her behind  
 And kissed her well and took his psaltery  
 And strummed a thunderous melody.

One day Alison went to church  
 To pray and do Christ's holy work  
 Upon a solemn holiday.  
 Her forehead gleamed as clear as day  
 Where she had washed it after work.

200

The parish had a brisk young clerk,  
 A handsome lad named Absolon.  
 His golden hair was curled and shone,  
 Glistening and arranged with art,  
 On either side beside his part.

Red cheeks, eyes of a grayish hue,  
 Rose windows carved on either shoe,  
 He minced his way down all life's paths  
 In tight red hose that showed his calves,  
 And a pale blue tunic like the sky,

*pierced work resembling church windows*

With fancy lacing to catch the eye.  
 Then too he wore a fine crisp surplice,  
 As white as blossoms in a mist.  
 He was a merry lad, I swear,  
 And he could shave, let blood, clip hair,  
 Or execute a deed or quicclaim.

220

His dancing brought him yet more fame,  
 For he could trip with nods and smiles  
 In twenty different Oxford styles  
 And saw upon a dainty fiddle  
 And sing falsetto, high and brittle,  
 Or finger tunes on his guitar.  
 There was no tavern, brewhouse, bar

25

Where any pretty waitress was  
He did not vie for her applause.  
But still his speech was too fastidious,  
And he considered faring hideous.

230

This Absolom, so blithe and gay,  
Carried the censer on holidays,  
Censuring the girls and young wives first  
With killing looks that he'd rehearsed,  
And most of all the woodwright's wife,  
Just now the focus of his life.

*indecipherable*

She was so sweet and lecherous,  
If only she could be a mouse,  
And he a cat, she'd be his dinner.  
He set his heart and soul to win her.  
She dazzled him. Ah, he was suffering.  
From no wife would he take an offering.  
He claimed his courtesy forbid it.

240

That night was fine; a bright moon lit it.  
Absolom took his guitar abroad.  
He couldn't sleep; love's urgent prod  
Pricked up his pulse. His heart was swelling.  
He made his way to Alison's dwelling,  
About the time the cocks had crowed.  
And stood before his mother lode,  
Outside a little shuttered window.

250

There he sang out soft and low:  
"Ah now, dear apple of my eye,  
Pity me, or I must die,"  
With tremolos upon the strings.

The carpenter waked and heard him sing,  
And turned to face his wife in bed.  
"What is this, Alison?" he said.

260

"Absolom out calling by our wall?"  
"Yes, John, I heard him carterwaul,"  
She answered. "What a shameful mess!"  
Well, this went on, as you might guess.  
For days to come young Absolom  
Could think of only Alison.  
Awake all night, blear-eyed all day,  
He combed his locks and made them gay,

Wooing her with emissaries  
And following her to fetch and carry.  
He warbled like a nightingale.  
He bought her sweetened wine and ale.  
He sent her hot cakes every day.  
Since she was town-bred, he offered pay.

270

(With some girls tender words will jibe,  
While others hold out for a bribe.)  
Once, to show his depth of soul,  
He appeared onstage in Herod's role,  
But nothing served his case, alas,  
For she loved only Nicholas.

Absolom might as well flip sand;  
He'd never bring this bird to hand.  
Instead, she laughed at him and scoffed:  
His pains were slight; his wits were soft.  
It's very true, as all men say,  
The nearby sly one wins the day,  
While the far-off lover loses.

280

Let Absolom do just as he chooses;  
As he was seldom in her sight,  
Our Nicholas eclipsed his light.  
Rejoice, you lucky Nicholas;  
Let Absolom sing out "Alas!"  
It happened on a Saturday,  
When John was gone to Osenay,  
That Nicholas and Alison  
Met to plan their liaison.

290

Young Nicholas would use his wife  
To trap the husband with his guile  
And then, if all their plans went right,  
He'd lie in her smooth arms all night.  
(She clearly wished as much as he did  
To see her jealous husband cheated.)  
The lad was one who never tarried.  
He slyly to his chamber carried  
Meat and drink to last two days.  
Then he told Alison to say,  
When John should ask her where he was,  
She'd no idea at all, because

300

She hadn't seen him, quick or still.  
Indeed, she feared that he was ill.  
No cry of hers or servants stirred him.  
If not some sickness, what deterred him?

310

The day passed uneventfully  
With Nicholas waiting quietly,  
Dozing and eating at his desk.  
Till, Sunday evening just at dusk,  
John wondered where the lad had got to.  
What sort of pass had he been brought to?  
"I am afraid, by holy Thomas,  
There's something wrong with Nicholas.  
God grant that he's not sick or dead!  
The world is fickle now," he said.  
"Today I saw a corpse in church,  
And Monday last I saw him work.  
Go up, Robin" (to his knave),  
"Call him out with voice or save.  
Let me know what you discover."

320

The lad went forth to rouse our lover.  
Outside the room that Nicholas rented  
He knocked and called like one demented:  
"What? How! Master Nicholas!  
Say, do you mean to sleep all day?"  
He paused to listen. Not a word!

330

He found a hole, low in a board,  
The house cat's passage to the room,  
And peeped inside despite the gloom.  
At length he made out Nicholas  
Gaping like a man possessed,  
Or someone addled by the moon!  
He dashed downstairs again and soon  
Explained that Nicholas seemed enchanted.  
The carpenter roused himself and ranted:  
"Help us, dear Saint Frideswide!  
You never know what will betide!  
The man has softened his psychology  
By his long study of astrology!  
I knew he would, the silly sod!  
No one can learn the mind of God!

known for her healing power  
340

Blessed is a man indeed,  
Knowing nothing but his creed.  
Another seeking hidden lore  
Roamed looking upward evermore  
Into the stars. Hal As was fit,  
He tumbled in an open pit.  
He hadn't seen it! By Saint Thomas,  
I pity handy Nicholas.

Please tell this of Thales.

350

I'll cure him of his studying;  
I'll find a way, by Heaven's King!  
Here, let me pry against the floor,  
While, Robin, you heave up the door.  
We'll rouse him from his queer fit yet."  
He pulled up on the staff and let  
His lad, who relished smashing things,  
Heave the door from its fastenings.  
It fell in with a thunderous sound,  
But Nicholas never moved or frowned.  
He kept on goggling up in air,  
A picture of abject despair.  
John shook him sharply by the arm  
And called to him in great alarm:  
"What! Nicholas! Why, look down here!  
Think of Christ, whom we revere!  
I cross you against all elves and feys!"  
He said a night spell several ways—  
Toward each quarter of the floor  
And by the threshold of the door.  
"Christ Jesus and Saint Benedictus  
Let no unholy thing afflict us.  
I call upon white *paternoster*  
And every saint from here to Gloucester!"  
Finally, handy Nicholas  
Began to stir and sigh, "Alas!  
Must all the world be lost again?"  
"What?" said John. "Are you insane?  
Think on God like working men."  
But Nicholas called for drink and then  
Said they must counsel privately.  
"My vision touches you and me;

silly conjurations  
380

370

360

So pack the others off to bed."  
His news was secret, so he said.

The carpenter went to play his part,  
Returning with a brimming quart  
Of mighty ale for them to share.  
Nicholas shut the door with care.

He said, "Now, John, beloved host,  
"Swear on your blessed father's ghost  
That you won't pass on what I tell you.  
I call on Jesus to compel you.  
Betray me and your soul is lost!

And while you live, to your great cost,  
You shall be mad. I swear it's true."  
"Why, you don't think I'd babble, do you?"

Said the silly carpenter:  
"Christ's blood forbid that I should err  
By talking loosely. In God's name,  
I'll spill no word to child or dame."

"John," said Nicholas, "I will not lie.  
I've found by my astrology,  
Looking in the moon's clear light,  
Near one A.M. tomorrow night  
A rain will fall, with hail and mud,  
To more than double Noah's flood.  
In just an hour our world and we  
Shall all be drenched beneath the sea.  
Each one of us shall lose his life."

John answered, "Oh, alas, my wife!  
What? Must she drown? My Alison!"  
His anguish left him quite undone.  
"Is there no help for this?" he asked.

"Of course there is," said Nicholas,  
"If you will do just as I say.  
You mustn't try some other way;  
For Solomon's advice was good:  
'Do what men tell you, as you should,'  
If you obey, and do not fail,  
I'll save us without mast or sail,  
The three of us, that is, for look  
How God saved Noah in the Book

Gen. 6-9

390

by warning him, to his great wonder,  
How floods would wash the whole world under."

"I've heard the tale of this," said John.

"And have you heard how, later on,  
Noah argued and implored  
Before he got his wife aboard?"

Said Nicholas. "She made him wish  
That he had fed her to the fish!  
Or that he'd built the stubborn crone  
A ship that she could sail alone!

Now here's my plan. It calls for haste.  
We have no further time to waste.

"Go out at once and carry off  
A brewing tub or kneading trough  
For each of us. They must be large—  
Enough to float in like a barge.  
Provision each with drink and food.  
A single day's worth will be good.

The flood will slack and drain away  
The morning of the second day.  
No other soul must give you aid;  
We can't save Robin or your maid.

Don't ask me why, for I won't tell,  
But know this too is great God's will.  
Content yourself, unless you're mad  
To have the grace that Noah had.

I'll rescue Alison, by my salvation.  
But not without this preparation.

"Here's more to do. You must agree,  
When you have tubs for just us three,  
To hang them high among the beams,  
But no one else must know our schemes.

Next, when you've done as I have said,  
Supply each craft with beer and bread  
And an ax apiece, to cut the lashings.  
When the water rises, splashing,

We'll chop a passage through the gable,  
Garden-ward, above the stable,  
So we can float, secure, elated,  
Although the world is inundated.

popular scene in mystery plays

430

400

440

410

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420

460



You'll bob along, I undertake,  
Just like a duck behind her drake.  
I'll call, 'Alison, John, what cheer?  
The flood is passing, never fear!  
And you will say, 'Ah, Nicholas!  
Your plan has worked. We're well awedigh.'  
Then we will rule the world for life,  
Great lords, like Noah and his wife.

"One thing could still spoil our delight:  
We must be sure on that same night  
When we have got ourselves onboard,  
Not one of us shall speak a word  
Or cry out, even in a prayer,  
That's God's command in this affair.  
"If noise is bad, why, sin is worse.

You and Alison must have no commerce,  
Nor in looking nor in deed.  
Hang far apart. And now, Godspeed!  
Tomorrow when the world's asleep,  
Into our kneading tubs we'll creep,  
And wait there as God wills we should.  
Get to it. Show you've understood.  
I will not offer more direction.  
Men say, 'Wise agents are perfection.'  
It takes no clerk to hang a trough.  
So save us wisely. Now, be off!"

The silly woodwright went his way,  
Often sighing, "Welladay,"  
And told his wife what you have heard.  
Of course she knew it, every word,  
And knew what lay behind it too,  
But clutched her heart and changed her hue  
And said, "Alas! Defend us John!  
Save us or we are undone!  
I am your true and wedded wife.  
Look to me now. Preserve my life!"  
Ah, the power of affection!  
Men can die of false dejection,  
So deeply can impressions root.  
John is gaping, stricken mute:

470

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His mind's eye sees, with no more urging,  
Noah's flood rampaging, surging,  
To drown young Alison, his dear.  
He quakes and wails with sorry cheer.  
His throat constricts, he starts to cough.  
He runs to fetch a kneading trough,

A mighty brew tub, and a cistern,  
And haul each to his house in turn,  
And hang them up beneath the rafters.  
He made three ladders shortly after,  
Bored the uprights, set each rung,  
To climb up where the vessels hung.  
Then he provisioned every tub  
With ale and cheese and other grub—  
Sufficient for a day afloat.

Before he finished with each boat,  
He made up errands to employ  
His maid in London with the boy.  
As it grew dark on Monday night,  
Without so much as candle light,  
In silence and great secrecy,  
Into their tubs they climbed, all three.

They settled in as each preferred,  
And Nicholas hissed: "Now, mum's the word!"  
"Mum," said Alison; "Mum" said John,  
But he began to pray anon,  
Softly whispering each refrain,  
With both ears cocked to hear the rain.

John was tired. His fears were deep.  
He slipped into a labored sleep  
About the time the last light glimmered.  
His troubled spirit seethed and simmered.  
Then too, he snored. His head mislay.  
Down from his tub sneaked Nicholas.  
Down Alison as softly sped.  
Without a word they went to bed—  
John's bed, that is, where they delighted,  
Leaving the carpenter benighted.  
There Alison and Nicholas  
Did all they'd dreamed they would at last

510

520

530

540

Until the bell for lauds was ringing  
And clerics filled the church with singing.

Our other wooper, Absolom,

The lad that love so worked upon,

That week had gone to Osenay,

Among a group on holiday.

He asked a passing cloisterer

For news of John the carpenter

As they stood there beside the church.

The monk had not seen John at work

All week, he said. "I understood,

We sent him out to cut some wood,

Just as he must often do,

And sleep abroad a night or two.

Or maybe he's at home today.

He might be there. I couldn't say."

Young Absolom heard this with delight,

And thought: "Lord, will I prow! tonight!

I surely haven't seen the man

About his house since day began.

"When the first cock crow is uttered

I'll knock where Alison's room is shuttered,

The lowest window, close at hand.

By God, I'll make her understand

My love and longing. I can't miss.

I know I'll get at least a kiss.

At last some comfort for my pay!

My mouth has itched the livelong day.

That must mean kissing at the least.

Last night I dreamed a richer feast!

I'll lie down for an hour or two,

And then may all my dreams come true!"

At length, the first cock's crowing done,

Up rose this jolly Absolom,

Donned his best clothes, bright and rich,

Chewed cardamom and licorice

To smell more sweet. He dressed his hair,

And underneath his tongue, with care,

He placed a sprig of herb-of-Paris—

A charm that would debauch an heiress—

*about 3 AM*

550

And hastened to the woodwright's house  
To catch the wife without her spouse.

Sidling up outside her window,

About waist-high, it sat so low,

He coughed once with a modest sound

And said, "My sweetest Alison,

My honeycomb, my cinnamon,

Awake, my dear, or I'm undone.

You never think about my woe,

How hot I burn wherever I go.

I hunger for you, I admit,

Like a lamb kept from the tit.

My only longing is for you.

A turtledove would seem untrue

Compared to me. Ah, dear, be swayed."

"Clear off, Jack Fool," she said.

"So help me God, I will not kiss you.

I love another—he's my bliss, too,

As you are not. Christ, Absolom,

Get out or I will throw a stone.

Now let me sleep, by twenty devils!"

"Alas," said Absolom, "how evil,

That true love should be spurned this way,

But kiss me, dear; ease my dismay,

For love of Jesus and of me."

"And will you go at once?" asked she.

"Yes, darling," said this Absolom.

"Make ready, then, I come anon."

"Hush," she hissed to Nicholas,

"And you shall laugh your fill at last."

Young Absolom sank to his knees

And said, "I'm lord of all I see.

Surely this is just the start!

Darling! Your grace! Sweet Bird! Your heart!"

The window opened with a click.

"Come here," she said, "and kiss me quick,

Before our nosy neighbors see!"

Absolom wiped his mouth with glee.

The night was dark as pitch or coal,

And out the window she put her hole.

*perhaps Paris quadrifolia*

580

590

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610

620

Absolom fared no better or worse,  
But with his mouth he kissed her arse,  
And savored it, before he guessed  
And gagged and spit in rare distress,  
For he knew women have no beard.  
He'd felt a thing all roughly haired.  
"Ack," he said, "alas, ugh, phunt."

630

"Tee-hee-hee!" she said, and shut  
The window in the young clerk's face.

"A beard! A beard!" roared Nicholas,  
"By God's dear body, what a skit!"  
Poor Absolom heard him, every bit,  
And paused just long enough to hiss:  
"I swear, by God, you'll pay for this!"

640

Who's rubbing now and scrubs his lips  
With dust and sand and straw and chips,  
But Absolom? "I'll give my soul,"  
He said, "to fry on Satan's coals,  
If I now swerve aside or rest  
Till I avenge this pretty jest.  
O God, if I had only flinched!"

His eager love was wholly quenched,  
For from the time he kissed her anus  
All thought of paramours was heinous.  
Indeed, his lust was dissipated.

650

He found all women vile and hated  
Their gender so he almost wept.  
But luckily the town still slept.  
He went to see the smith Gervaise,  
At work before the cattle grazed,  
Sharpening coulters and welding plows.  
His knock was just enough to rouse  
The smith from work and make him come.  
"Who's there?" he said.

*a blade that goes before a plowshare*

"It's Absolom!"

660

"What, Absolom, by Christ's sweet cross!  
Up so early? Are you lost?  
Some saucy girl, I swear it's true,  
Has got her grappling hooks in you.  
Saint Notre above knows what I mean."

*Saint Notr, a Cornish hermit*

Absolom didn't care a bean  
For jokes like these. He found them thin.  
He had a lot more wool to spin  
Than Gervaise knew. He said, "Dear friend,  
This coulter heated white to mend,  
Is what I need. Please let me take it.  
You'll get it back. No fear I'll break it."

670

Gervaise agreed. "If it were gold  
Or bag of precious coins untold,  
I'd give it to you; that's no lie,  
But, by the Devil, tell me why."

"Let that," said Absolom, "be as it may.  
I'll tell you later, when it's day."

680

He caught the iron where it was cool  
And went at once to wield the tool.  
Back at the window in a trice,  
He coughed discreetly, knocking twice,  
Just as he had done before.

Pert Alison answered him once more:  
"Who can this be? A thief, I swear."  
"Oh, no," he said, "it's me, my dear.  
Your Absolom, my chicken wing,

And I have brought a golden ring,  
My mother's ring. It's well engraved,  
The finest gold, or I'm not saved.  
And you shall have it for a kiss."

690

Now Nicholas was up to piss  
And thought he could improve the joke.  
He'd have *his* ass kissed by the bloke.

He opened up the window wide  
And thrust his derriere outside,  
Beyond the buttocks to the waist.  
Absolom strained to see the place:

"Speak," he said, "my bird, my heart."

700

This Nicholas let fly a fart  
Greater than a thunder stroke.  
It almost made our lover choke.  
But he swung his iron into the farce  
And smote young Nicholas on the arse.  
Nicholas' hind end popped and fried,

Around the iron a hand's breadth wide,  
And thinking he would surely die,  
The lad began to bawl and cry:  
"Water! Water! By God's heart!"

710

The carpenter woke up with a start,  
Heard someone shouting, "Water! God!"  
And thought: "Ah! This is Noah's Flood!"  
He sat straight up without a word  
And swung his ax to cut the cord.  
His tub fell with a fearsome crash.  
He had no time to stir his hash,  
But lay upon the floorboards, stunned.

Then Nicholas and Alison  
Called, "Help! Awake! Alack! Alas!"  
Their clamor couldn't be surpassed,

720

As neighbors rushed to gawk at John  
Where he lay still and pale and wan.  
His arm was broken in the fall.  
He woke up wincing, but that's not all;  
Each word he said was shouted down,  
By Nicholas and Alison.

They told the neighbors he'd gone mad  
With fear of Noah's flood and had,  
Because his silly wits were soft,  
Brought home three mighty kneading troughs,  
And hung them up beneath the roof  
And made them sit with him for proof  
That they believed his fears were just.

730

The neighbors laughed, as people must,  
At such a tale. They peered and poked  
About the place, retold the joke,  
And howled whenever John protested.  
They guessed, of course, how he'd been bested,  
But none would credit his contentions.  
They held him mad without dissension.  
Nicholas was backed by all the clerks,  
Condemning John's distempered quirks.  
The whole town laughed to see John humbled  
And know his pretty wife was tumbled.  
Though Absolom thought that he would die,

740

All knew he'd kissed her nether eye,  
And Nicholas was scalded on the bum.  
That's it. God save us, all and some!

Heere endeth the Millere his tale.

# THE REEVE



## THE REEVE'S PROLOGUE

We laughed our loud, I must confess  
At Absalom and Nicholas.  
Then different folks said differently,  
But everyone at length agreed  
We liked the tale and weren't aggrieved.  
Our one dissenter was the Reeve.  
Because he was himself a woodwright,  
He took John's downfall as a slight;  
And stared around and looked perverse.  
"By God," he said, "I could rehearse  
The blacking of a miller's eye,  
But I'm too old for ribaldry.  
My grass-time's gone, I must eat hay.  
An old man mustn't talk that way.  
This white top shows my age and cares;  
My lustr should freeze to match my hairs,  
Unless I'm like an open-arse,  
That fruit that just keeps getting worse  
Till tossed out on a garbage pile.<sup>1</sup>  
Old men go bad in medlar style.  
Unless we're rotten, we're not ripe,  
But dance like fools to any pipe.  
We hope, as sure as men drink ale,  
For a white top and a green tail.

*a medlar, an apple-like fruit*

20

1. Medlar fruits have an anatomical-looking opening at the blossom end and lend themselves to scatological references (See *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.37-8). They are also best eaten when they've softened to the consistency of apple butter. As Chaucer demonstrates, the Reeve can never get his metaphors straight. He may be saying that that unless he controls his passions in age, he will go on rotting like a medlar. Or he may mean that, like a medlar, he will never be worth anything until his flesh is fully rotten. The medlar's crude common name also shows the Reeve is *not* too old for ribaldry.

But we're not leaks. Our wares hang down  
Despite our will to cat around.  
Though we can't use it, lust's not dead.  
Its fires are only banked instead.  
"Four other coals match lust indeed—  
Boasting, anger, lying, greed.  
These never lose their glow with age.  
Though limbs grow creaky by that stage,  
The will's still spry, and that's the truth.  
I boil with lust like any youth.  
My life has ebbed, and death's approached  
Quite near since my life's cask was broached.  
When I was born, too long ago,  
Death tapped that keg and let it flow;  
Since then my busy spigot's run.  
The emptying is nearly done.  
The stream of life runs almost dry,  
And though my tongue keeps up its cry  
Of misery, that roo has passed.  
Dodge is all we're left at last."  
Our Host despised this sermonizing  
And shouted like an angry king:  
"Why plague us with your dismal wit?  
We might as well read Holy Writ!  
We'll have no preaching from a reeve  
Till cobbler caprain ships and weavel  
Tell us your tale, and mind the time.  
Here's Depford, and we're half through prime!  
Greenwich next, the home of shrews,  
Your tale, and briefly, if you choose!"  
"Then hear it," said this Reeve, Oswald,  
"But promise you won't be appalled.  
My tale must dabble in the mire,  
If I'm to counter fire with fire."  
"The Miller told, God curse his spite,  
How Alison beguiled a woodwright,  
I felt his scorn, for I'm one too,  
So here's what I intend to do.  
I'll pay him back in his own terms.  
My tale will prick him till he squirms.

*It's about 7:30 AM; they're five miles on their way.*

50

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He sees a dust mote in my eye,  
I'll show the beam in his, or try."

## THE REEVE'S TALE

At Trumpington, just outside Cambridge,  
A brook runs down beneath a bridge,  
And standing by this pleasant rill,  
In all God's truth, there is a mill.  
The jolly miller dwelling there  
Was peacock-proud and free of care.  
For he could pipe or catch a fish  
Or shoot an arrow where he wished,  
Play drinking games or wrestle hard;  
And at his belt he wore a sword,  
A dagger too, well ground and slim.  
No prudent man would rattle him.  
A Sheffield blade tucked in his hose,  
A full round face with flattened nose,  
And ape-hair matted on his skull  
Proclaimed the man a savage bull.  
Few neighbors ever dared to anger  
This vile and vengeful noggin-banger.  
Then too he pilfered grain and meal,  
A sly deceiver, born to steal.

Insolent Simkin was his name.  
His wife was of some local fame.  
The parson had begotten her,  
And paid her dowry, I infer,  
To join the miller to his blood.  
Nuns tended to the little bud,  
For Simkin wanted to be sure  
The girl was gently raised and pure,  
And fit to be a yeoman's wife.  
She grew up spoiled for common life.  
On holidays, no one could see  
A vainer pair of their degree,  
He, with his hood wound round his head,

*Mat. 7:3, Luke 6:41-2*

70

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90

She, tripping in a gown of red,  
His fiery hose dyed just the same.  
Everybody called her "dame."

*Working people weren't supposed to wear red.*

No man dared seduce this wife,  
For Simkin would cut short his life—  
Corner him and go to work  
With cutlass, bodkin, knife, and dirk.  
Such men are hot as boiling tar  
(Or want the town to think they are).  
As she was born beneath a cloud,  
She made it up by being proud,  
And went about with nose in air.  
She thought no lady living there  
Could match her blood or noble carriage.  
The nuns taught her before her marriage.  
They had a daughter, you should know,  
A girl of twenty years or so,  
And a jolly infant less than one,  
A little boy, their only son.

The girl was large—she grew up fast—  
A pushed-in nose, eyes gray as glass,  
A big, broad bum, and pillowy breast,  
But her hair was striking, I arrest.

At least the parson thought her fair.

He meant to make the girl his heir:  
She'd have his goods and household stuff,  
And more, if she wed well enough.  
He hoped she'd win a noble match,  
The grandest suitor she could catch.  
Since holy church goods must go wholly  
To churchmen and their families solely,  
He'd make her rich, her and her lord,  
By skimming from the Church's hoard.

Our miller had exclusive rights  
To grind for all surrounding sites,  
Especially one Cambridge college,  
King's Hall, a noble fount of knowledge.  
He ground the scholars' wheat and malt.  
It happened once, through no one's fault,  
Their manacle became unwell,

*later merged into Trinity college*

*business agent*

120

130

110



Confined entirely to his cell.

If Sinkin robbed their flour of old,  
He stepped it up a hundredfold.

Where once he stole a little bit  
He now filched all that he could get.  
Let the warden rage and curse.

That only made his losses worse,  
While Sinkin sulked and ached hurt.

Two ragged scholars, bright and pert,  
Were living in this same King's Hall,  
Apt lads for any prank or brawl.

Each thought he spied a chance for fun,  
And begged the warden, two on one,  
To let them journey as they willed  
To see a load of dry grain milled.

*They'd* foil the miller, by their neck.  
He couldn't short them half a peck.

Just let him try! Of course they'd know.  
At length the warden let them go.

One was John, Allan the other,  
Both from a little town called Strother,  
Far to the north. I don't know where.

They chose a horse for this affair,  
Brought out the grain and strapped it on,  
And set out jingling, just at dawn,  
With swords and bucklers by their side.

John knew the way without a guide.  
At the mill they dumped the grain.

With "Fresh work, Sinkin, in your vein!  
How are your daughter and your wife?"

"Welcome," said Sinkin, "by my life,  
Allan and John, what brings you here?"

"Ach, friend," said John, "need has no peer.  
Without a servant one can't shirk;

As need determines, he must work.  
Our manciple is nearly dead,

To hear the teeth clash in his head,  
So I have come, and Allan too,

To bring our unmilled grain to you.  
Perhaps you'll grind the load today?"

140

*master of the college*

150

160

170

"Done," said Sinkin, "right away!  
What will you do while it is milling?"

"Stand by the hopper, if you're willing,"  
Said John, "and watch the grain go in.

I never saw, by all my kin,  
How hoppers shurtle to and fro."

Then Allen said, "And I will go  
Below the millstone, by my crown,

And watch the flour tumble down  
Into the trough, a pleasant sport,

For, John, I'm one of your own sort,  
A novice miller, as you say."

"Ah," Sinkin thought, "my lucky day.  
How can they think I'm not aware

They mean to hold me to my share?  
Let's see them match my roguery

For all of their philosophy!  
The more smart ticks they try to play,

The more I mean to steal today.  
In place of flour, I'll give them bran!

Your scholar's not the wisest man,  
Or so the wolf heard from the mare.<sup>2</sup>

So let them watch. As if I care!"  
He stepped outside beyond their sight,

And when he saw the time was right  
He made a circuit of the mill

And found their horse well hitched and still,  
In a little arbor's shade.

The miller slipped into the glade,  
Removed the bridle, set it free.

The horse let out a glad "Weehee!"  
Toward a swamp where wild mares ran

And made off as the miller planned.  
Saying nothing of the horse.

The man left things to run their course  
Until the flour was fairly ground,  
Neatly sacked, securely bound.

180

190

200

210

2. The mare told the leanned wolf the price of her foal was written on the bottom of her hind hoof. When he looked, she kicked him.

Then John found out the nag was gone  
And called out, "Allan, we're undone!  
The horse has bolted, by God's trumpet!  
Sit yourself! Come on, man, hump it!  
The warden's sure to have us brained!"  
Allan forgot his meal and grain.  
All those cares evaporated.

220

He stared about him addlepared.  
The wife came squawking like a hen:  
"Alas, your horse is in the fen!  
Those mares will lead him far away!  
Curse the hand that let him stray;  
He should have been much better tied!  
You've lost him now for sure," she cried.

230

"Allan," said John, "put off your sword,  
And I'll do likewise. On my word,  
I can outrun any buck.  
We'll catch him with a little luck.  
You should have put him in a stall.  
My God, have you no sense at all?"

240

The clerks stripped down to run a course  
Against their foe, Bayard, the horse.  
Meanwhile, the miller seized his hour,  
And half a bushel of their flour.  
He gave it to his wife to take  
And knead into a mighty cake.  
He said, "Just watch those scholars work!  
A miller's too much for a clerk.  
Their learned arts get in their way.  
But, Lord, they're nimble! Watch them play!  
The horse is faster, by my crown."

250

The silly clerks ran up and down,  
With "Whoa!" and "Stop!" and "Watch out there!"  
"I'll head the beast! He's gone! Now where?"  
But it was far into the night  
Before the horse gave up the fight.  
Splashing in mud as black as pitch,  
They got him bridled in a ditch.  
Then worn and wet as beasts in rain  
They led him to the mill again.

"Alas," said John, "that I was born!  
All we've achieved is shame and scorn.  
The grain is gone, and we're two fools.  
Unfit to play by grown men's rules.  
Whatever will the warden say?"

260

And so John grieved along the way,  
Leading Bayard through the mire.  
They found the miller by his fire.  
Now it was late and they were caught.  
They wrung their hands and humbly sought  
A lodging there. They said they'd pay.

270

Sly Sinkin answered, "Welladay!  
Such as I own, you'll have a part.  
The house is small, but can't your art,  
By argument, stretch any place—  
A mile from twenty feet of space?  
See if my room will suit you each,  
Or make it bigger with a speech."

Saint Cuthbert, c. 635-87

280

"Sinkin," said John, "by Cuthbert's ghost,  
Indeed you make a merry host.  
I've heard men say, 'Have one of two:  
What's there or what you brought with you.'  
If you provide us meat and beer,  
Allan and I will hold you dear,  
And we shall pay. Don't think we'll balk.  
No empty hand can catch a hawk.  
Look now, here's silver, by my head."

290

The girl was sent for beer and bread  
While smiling Sinkin broiled a goose.  
Secured Bayard from getting loose,  
And made a bed in his own room,  
Spread sheets and blankets in the gloom,  
Close to where the couple slept  
And where his daughter's bed was kept—  
Three beds together, side-by-side,  
Because, for all the miller's pride,  
There was no other room to use.  
The scholars supped and traded news,  
And felt the brew go to their heads,  
Till midnight came, and time for bed.

The miller's brain was turned by ale,  
 Sheer drunkenness had left him pale.  
 He burped and snorted through his nose  
 And babbled hoarsely in his throes.  
 He climbed in bed beside his wife

300

And found her keen as any knife,  
 For she had wet her whistle too.  
 The baby's crib, as such things do,  
 Sat by the footboard of her bed.  
 Now that the crock of ale was dead,  
 The girl retired with little noise,  
 And so did both the college boys.  
 They didn't need a sleeping draught.  
 The miller had drunk himself so daft  
 He let our horse-snores in his sleep  
 And thunderous farts both long and deep.  
 His wife sang tenor to his bass.

310

The walls shook in that little space.  
 The girl snored too, for company.

When Allan heard this melody,  
 He shook his friend and said, "Asleep?  
 I swear their snoring makes me weep.  
 God, how they sing their midnight hymns!  
 May wild fire burn their heads and limbs!  
 Their snores have set me wondering:  
 How to repay such thundering?

320

I'll never get a bit of rest;  
 Still, . . . that may turn out for the best.  
 Hal John, as I'm a proper bloke,  
 I'll give that girl a manly poke.  
 Some compensations owed to us,  
 For John, I swear the law reads thus:  
 'If in one thing you're aggrieved,  
 Choose another to be relieved.'  
 Our wheat is stolen, John, I say,  
 And we've been badly used today.  
 Well, since I've had no quid pro quo,  
 I'll pay myself before I go.  
 By God, I'll have that girl indeed!"

330

"But, brother," said his friend, "take heed!

The miller plays for heavy stakes.  
 Suppose she squeals and he awakes.  
 He'll do us grievous injury!"

Allan said, "Just wait and see."

340

The room was steeped in darkest black.  
 He found the girl upon her back,  
 And got to work when he came nigh  
 So swiftly that she couldn't cry,  
 Nor that she cared, once he was on.  
 Let Allan play, consider John.

John lay still a little space,  
 Stark consternation on his face.  
 "Alas," he said, "a wicked jape!  
 Of all of us, I am the ape.

350

Allan has something for his harms,  
 To wit, the daughter in his arms.  
 He took a chance, and now he's sped,  
 While I lie like a chump in bed;  
 And when this joke is told one day,  
 I'll be the nitwit of the play!  
 Well, let me rise and try my luck.  
 No one succeeds without some pluck!"  
 He rose up then and felt around,  
 Seeking the cradle, which he found  
 And moved discreetly by his bed.

360

The wife soon shook her muddled head,  
 And stumbled out to have a piss.  
 Then back. But soft now, what's amiss?  
 There was no cradle by her way!  
 "Alas," she said, "I've gone astray.  
 This must be the young clerks' bed.  
 God's providence great," she said.  
 She found the cradle with her hand,  
 And then the bed, just as she planned.  
 As nothing happened to recall her,  
 She snuggled down beside the scholar  
 And lay quite still and would have slept,  
 But John let out a snort and leapt,  
 And clasped the wife in such a way,  
 She knew what game he meant to play.

370

And let him delve for all his worth.  
Ah, now both scholars swam in mirth,  
Until the cock began to sing.

380

Allan was running out of string,  
The lad had worked beyond his strength.  
"Farewell, Moll," he said at length,  
"It's morning now; I mustn't wait.  
But from this hour, I tell you straight,  
This scholar will remember you."

"Ah, love," she said, "I hope that's true!  
But hear this, Allan; listen well:  
As you go out by Father's mill,  
Step in the door and look around.

390

You'll find a cake of fifteen pounds.  
That cake was made of your own meal,  
Fresh flour I helped my pa to steal.  
Farewell," she said, and turned aside,  
And with the word she almost cried.

Allan thought: "Before it's dawn,  
I'll creep back into bed with John."  
He found the cradle with his toes:

400

"By God," he murmured, "that was close!  
My head's so woozy from my work,  
I've come the wrong way by some quirk.  
This cradle marks the miller's bed.  
Let's try the other one instead."

And so he crawled, the devil's prey,  
Into the bed where Simkin lay.

He thought the miller there was John,  
Climbed in beside him with a yawn,

And grabbed his neck and whispered low,  
"Pig's head! Here's something you should know,  
For Christ's sake hear a noble story,

410

For by Saint James in all his glory,  
Three times so far in this short night,  
I've swived the girl with great delight,  
While you lay quailing in your bed!"

"Muck!" said the miller, "I'll have your head!  
Traitor! Scholar! Where's my knife?  
By God, you'll pay me with your life!

What? Would you ruin and degrade  
My daughter, such a well-born maid?"  
He gripped the scholar's Adam's apple  
And held him down to knee and grapple  
And smore him roundly on the nose.

420

Hot blood shot out as from a hose.  
The miller freshened his attack.  
They writhed like two pigs in a sack.  
Never was a fight more stark,

Till Simkin stumbled in the dark,  
And fell down backward on his wife.

Now she knew nothing of their strife,  
For she was sleeping like the dead,  
Worn out by serving John in bed.

430

She started up, called out in fright:

"Great Cross of Bromeholm, give me light!

*In manus tuas!* Set me free!

Alack! The devil's taken me!

My heart is shattered; I am dead;

He's crushed my womb and cracked my head!

Up, Simkin, for the scholars' fight!"

Next, John awoke without a light,

And groped about to find a staff.

The wife did too on her behalf.

She knew the layout brick by brick,

And by the wall she found a stick.

A sliver of the moon's bright light

Gleamed in the room, though it was slight.

Two shadows rustled to and fro,

But who was who, she couldn't know.

Just then she saw a whitish patch

Jounce up and down with great dispatch.

"Ah, that's the scholar's cap!" she thought.

Edging up to where they fought,

She swung the staff with all her might,

But missed the lad for want of light,

And cracked her husband's hairy skull.

That did for him. She heard him fall:

"Help!" he said. "I die today!"

The two clerks thrashed him where he lay,

450

*a shrine in Norfolk*  
"Into your hands" [Lord, I commend  
my spirit]—Luke 23:46

440

38

Then gathered up their horse and traps  
And took their flour, and more perhaps.  
They found their cake inside the mill,  
The full half-bushel by its feel.

And thus the miller was lambasted,  
And lost his flour and cake untasted,  
And cooked his goose for free, by God,  
For two who flayed him with a rod.  
His wife's debauched, his daughter too,  
To give the churlish knave his due.  
He proved the saw, a bitter pill:  
"The wicked man shall suffer ill."  
A swindler swindled, you'll agree,  
Suits God in his high majesty.  
Christ save all pilgrims without fail!  
And thus I've capped the Miller's tale!

Heere is ended the Reves Tale.

460

470

## THE COOK



### THE COOK'S TALE

*The Cook's story starts out to be a rough and tumble narrative like the Miller's and the Reeve's, but it takes place among a lower sort of people, and in London—the Cook's hometown—not Oxford or Cambridge. The prologue begins with a good-natured quarrel, when Harry Bailey, the Host, accuses the Cook of unsavory practices—selling dried-out and warmed-over meat pies and roasted geese with spoiled stuffing. The Cook promises to retaliate with a tale against innkeepers, but not now. His present story will concern "a jest that happened in our city."*

*The tale, just a fragment, never gets off the ground. The Cook introduces Pertin Reneler, a grocer's apprentice marked for trouble. His life is full of loose living and short bouts of jail time. He can roll dice with suspicious facility and enjoys spending money, no doubt the reason his master often finds the strongbox empty. Upset by all this, the grocer discharges Pertin, who moves in with a fellow scamp. This fellow has a wife who pretends to keep a shop but really supports herself by whoring . . . and at this point the story breaks off. One manuscript contains the note, "Of this cokes tale naked Chaucer na moore."*

## EPILOGUE TO THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE

Up spoke the Host with this tale done,  
 "Good men, listen, every one!

This was a thrifty story and no loss.

Sir Parson, now, by Jesus' cross,

Where's the tale you pledged before?

Wise men like you, well steeped in lore,

Can do us good, by God's simplicity!"

The Parson answered, "*Benedicite!*"

What makes him swear so sinfully?"

"Ah," said the Host, "a saint, is he?

I smell a Lollard in the wind. <sup>1</sup>

Now listen,"—here the fellow grinned—

"Hear me, gentes, it's determined,

We'll now enjoy a wholesome sermon.

This Lollard here will preach somewhat!"

"No, by my father, he shall not!"

The Shipman said, "nor will he teach,

Or gloss God's word with lying speech.

We all believe in Christ," said he,

"Why stir us up to disagree,

And sow sharp thistles in our corn?

No, Host, as sure as I was born,

I myself will tell a tale,

A merry story without fail,

A tale to wake this company,

And one without philosophy!

No quiddities or terms of law.

There's little Latin in my maw!"

20

1. A general term for early puritans who condemned worldliness in or out of the church and objected to nonbiblical practices, like pilgrimages.

## THE WIFE OF BATH



## THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

My life gives me authority,

Enough and more, it seems to me,

To speak of all the woe in marriage,

For since I was twelve years of age,

By God, who's evermore alive,

Of wedded husbands, I've had five

(If they were all legitimate),

And each a man of worth and weight.

But someone said, upon that heading,

As Christ attended just one wedding—

At Cana, it was, in Galilee—

That fact alone should prove to me

That I should marry only once.

Then there's that text where Christ confronts

Beside a well, as God and man,

A neighborly Samaritan:

"You've married five," he said, "but stay.

I say the man with you today

Is not your husband." So he said,

But who knows what went through his head?

No one can explain his grounds

For placing five men out of bounds.

How many husbands might she marry?

Now I don't wish to be contrary,

But no one has defined that number.

Priests may reproach, condemn, encumber,

But I know well, without a lie,

God bade us wax and multiply.

That gentle text I understand!

This too: that when I take a man,

Sirs, I become his chief concern

10

John 2.1

John 4.6-26

20

Gen. 1.28

30

Matt. 19.5

Not his relations, though they burn.  
These rules define the wedded state,  
And not how many men you mate.  
Bigamy, octogamy—

To me such terms are value free.

How many wives had Solomon?

Why, hundreds when the count was done.

I wish it were permitted me

To taste love half as oft as he!

Ah, what a gift he had for wives!

No living man could match his drives.

God knows, and why should we forget,

That king had many a merry fit

With each of them while yet alive!

So I praise God I've had my five.

Then too, I always picked the best

For manly wares and all the rest.

As many schools improve a clerk,

And widespread practice in his work

Corrects a craftsman, all agree,

Five husbands have perfected me.

Welcome the sixth when he appears!

I won't live chaste through all my years,

But when my spouse is dead and gone,

I'll wed another man anon.

Saint Paul himself says I am free

To wed a man who pleases me.

He sanctions marriage, though he's stern.

Far better that we wed than burn!

Though folks may call it villainy,

Lamech invented bigamy.

Abraham was a holy man,

And Jacob too, I understand,

Yet each of them had several wives

Like other men of holy lives.

Who has ever heard or read

That God forbid mankind to wed?<sup>1</sup>

40

50

Why, no one, or it's news to me.  
Did he require virginity?

Of course he never did, nor could.

Where Paul discusses maidenhood,

He says it is a blessed state

When women live without a mate.

That's all he says, and though it's true,

It's not a law—a good thing too.

Say God commanded chastity:

No one could wed by his decree.

With no seeds sown in marriage then,

He'd lose all virgins—and all men!

Paul couldn't bar, despite his bent,

What God ordained. No, he was sent

To make the virgin life a goal

For those already chaste of soul.

But that's not all of us, you know.

God designates. And rightly so.

Saint Paul himself was always chaste,

Abstemious in every taste.

He wished the same for every man

But never issued that command.

Thus I have leave to wed again.

No single man should think it sin

Or bigamy, once my mate's dead,

To take me up and share my bed.

Though Paul held women bad to touch,

Reclining on a couch or such

(That put the fire to the flax,

And you've seen how that mixture acts!),

He only termed virginity

A better choice than frailty;

He calls us merely frail, you see,

Who moderate our chastity.

I grant his point. Virginity

Surpasses sexuality.

Virgins are clean, body and soul;

We wives must play a lesser role.

But even in a lord's household

Not every dish is made of gold.

1 Cor 7.25

70

80

1 Cor 7.7

90

1 Cor 7.1

100

1. The Wife silently shifts the subject from multiple marriages to virginity, a much easier topic to discuss from her point of view.

Some are wood, and yet they serve.  
 God calls us just as we deserve.  
 Each person has a gift, we're told:  
 Some formed to give and some, withhold.

110  
*1 Cor 7:7*

Virginity's a great perfection.

A life is crowned by that election,  
 But Christ, who is perfection's fount,  
 Knew well not everyone would want  
 To sell his all and feed the poor,  
 Though he himself did that and more.

*Mat. 19:21*

Only the best of us should try.  
 Only the best, my lords, not I.  
 No, I'll bestow my flowers in life  
 On husbands, as befits a wife.

120

Just tell me your interpretation  
 Of members shaped for generation.  
 Why were the sexes made that way?  
 Sure, nature didn't go astray.

It's only half an explanation  
 To say they're simply for purgation,  
 Or to pretend that such details  
 Just set us females off from males.  
 That's simpleminded as you know;  
 Our whole lives say it isn't so.

130

Though clerks may blame me, on my oath,  
 I say we have these tools for both:  
 For daily tasks and as a way  
 Of getting children, if we may.

Why else would this old saw be true,  
 "A man must pay his wife her due"?  
 By "man must pay" what could be meant  
 But serve her with his instrument?

*1 Cor 7:3*

No, those parts have a dual causation—  
 For purging and for procreation.  
 Of course I don't say everyone  
 Must use his gear as I have done,

140

That is to say, engendering.  
 For chastity's a noble thing.  
 Christ was a maid shaped as a man,  
 And ever since the world began,

*virgin*

Saints have lived in chastity.  
 I'll not decry virginity.

150

Virgins are bread of finest wheat,  
 Wives, barley bread, more coarse and sweet.  
 Yet barley loaves of God's creation,  
 Fed Jesus and his congregation.  
 So just as God's hand molded us  
 I'll live my life in open trust

*John 6:9*

And use my wifely instrument  
 Without restraint, as it was sent.  
 If I'm standoffish, give me sorrow!  
 My man shall have it night and morrow,  
 Whenever he comes to pay his debt.

160

My husband, sirs, must be my thrall,  
 A man to answer every call,  
 And tire his flesh, while I'm his wife.  
 For I have power throughout my life  
 To rule his body, and not he.

That's what Paul's reaching means to me.  
 He bid our husbands love us well.

*Col. 3:19*

Lords, I agree, as you can tell!

170

Up spoke the Pardoner anon,  
 "Ach now, good lady, by Saint John,  
 You preach right nobly, on my life,  
 For I was set to take a wife.

But now you've made the cost so clear,  
 I vow that I'll not wed this year!"  
 Be still! said she. I've just begun.

I'll make you taste, before I've done,  
 A drink that savors worse than ale!  
 And when you've heard to good avail  
 The martial trials of married life  
 (And I have been a warlike wife;

180

That is to say, I was the whip),  
 Then let me know if you will sip  
 The barrel I shall tap for you.  
 But hear my tale before you do.  
 I'll give examples of my wiles.  
 "Who will not learn from others' trials,  
 Must be the butt of others' tales."



Prolemy knew what that entailis;  
Consult his *Almagest* and see.

"Grant mercy, lady, pardon me,"  
The Pardoner said. "As you began,  
Please tell away and spare no man.  
But teach us youths your strategies."

I shall, she said; just as you please.

But first I ask the company:

If I seem overbold and free,

Don't be aggrieved at what I say.

I only mean to joke and play.

Now, sirs, I will tell my tale.

As truly as I relish ale,

Of those five husbands that I had,

Three were good, and two were bad.

The three good men were rich and old

And scarcely able to uphold

The contract binding them to me—

You take my meaning, as I see.

I swear I'm laughing even yet

At how I made them heave and sweat.

Their antics gave me little pleasure

Once I controlled their land and treasure.

With that I ceased my diligence,

My wifely love and reverence.

They loved me so, by God above,

That I thought nothing of their love.

A woman's work is never done

To capture love when she has none.

But once I had them in my hand,

Their bodies, pulses, and their land,

Why should I care if they were pleased?

I was the one to be appeased.

I made them sweat, placating me.

They toiled whole nights in agony;

Yet never won for all their woe

The bacon prize set up at Dunmow.<sup>2</sup>

190

I governed them with such dispatch  
That they were happy just to catch  
My smile with gay things from the fair.  
But my compliant moods were rare,  
For I could sting them piteously.

Now listen close and follow me,

All wives who want to understand

The fittest way to treat a man.

Men can't rival, though they try,

A woman's gift to swear and lie.

(Of course I don't mean proper wives,  
But those perniciously advised.)

An able wife who knows her good

Can make men trust her as they should,

Believe her maid and not the town.

Here's what I said to bear them down:

"Sir, only dotards talk that way.

Why is our neighbor's wife so gay?

She's honored over all the rest.

I sit at home and poorly dressed.

What are you up to over there?

Are you so fond? Is she so fair?

What do you whisper to our maid?

A common lecher and his jadel

But let me have a passing friend

In innocence, why you contend

I've lost my virtue at his house.

You drag home drunken as a mouse,

And preach to me upon your bench!

'A man just digs an endless trench,'

You say, 'to wed a needy wife.

And if she's rich, of gentle life,

Why, she repays his loving folly

By being proud or melancholy.

And if she's fair, then he must dread

Some gigolo will turn her head.'

You say our virtue's soon untied

When it's assailed from every side.

"You say some men admire our wealth.

Or else our shape, good looks, or health.

210

220

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230

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250

260

2. At Dunmow in Essex a side of bacon was presented to any couple who avoided quarrels for a year and a day.

43

Perhaps they watch us sing or dance,  
Or love our style of dalliance,

Or praise our hands or slender arms,  
Or woo us for our other charms.

'No man can hold a wall,' you say,  
'When it's assaulted night and day.'

"Nor is an ugly wife secure.

You say her spaniel looks ensure  
She'll wag her tail for any man

Until she finds one she can land.

'There's not a goose but soon or late,'  
You say, 'she'll find herself a mate.'

A husband's helpless, doomed, you hold.  
No living wife can be controlled.

I've even heard you preach in bed,  
You say no man's required to wed,

Nor should he, if he'd save his soul.  
May lightning blasts consume you whole!

Go break your scrawny neck and choke!  
"You say that falling walls and smoke

And chiding wives cause men to fly  
From their own houses. What a lie!

What makes old dotards drivell so?  
"You say wives let their vices show

Once they are wed and feel secure:  
A firing proverb for a boor!

"You say a hound or ox or horse  
Is bought on trial by common course,

Like bowls and washpots that one tries,  
Spoons and stools and such supplies,

Or basins, clothes, and knives and files,  
But wives aren't subject to such trials

Till they are wedded—dorard, shrew!—  
It's only then our faults come through.

"You say that now your daily duty,  
Is coining tributes to my beauty.

You say I make you scan my face  
And call me fair and praise my grace,

And make a feast to mark my birthday,  
And work to keep me fresh and gay,

270

280

290

300

And give my old nurse help and aid,  
And cultivate my chambermaid,

And kowtow to my father's kin—  
Ach, what a sink of lies and sin!

"Yet Jenkin drives you to despair,  
The apprentice with the golden hair—

Shining, crisped, upon his crown—  
Because he squires me up and down.

I'd spurn him if you died tomorrow!  
But tell me why, to my great sorrow,

You hide your treasure chest and key,  
When half your goods belong to me.

Would you hoard money from your wife?  
No, you shall not, upon my life!

You can't contrive by force or stealth  
To rule my body and my wealth.

One will elude you, curse your eyes,  
For all your prying and your spies.

You'll never lock *me* in your chest!  
Just say, 'Dear, do as you think best.

I'll not attend to tales or malice;  
I love and trust you, dearest Alice!

No woman will be kept in charge.  
We must be free and roam at large.

"A man as learned as men may be,  
The astrologer Don Prolemy,

Put this down in his *Almagest*:  
'Of all wise men, that one is best,

Who doesn't care who rules the world,'  
Prolemy's saying, when uncured,

Means 'Have enough, and never care  
However well your friends may fare.'

That is, old fool, for all your spite,  
You get your fill of me each night.

Only a miser blind to shame  
Would grudge to share his lantern's flame.

No sharing hurts his light, indeed.  
Enough is plenty. More is greed.

"And then you carp, if wives are gay  
With clothes and gauds and fine array,

310

320

330

340

Those goods can harm our chastity,  
Because you know I disagre,

You cite these words in Saint Paul's name:

'Chaste array and modest shame,'

Paul said, 'These are a woman's rules,

And not curled hair and precious jewels,

Or pearls or gold or costly gowns.'

Faugh! I reject both text and grounds.

They move me no more than a gnat.

"And then you say I'm like a cat:

To keep a preening cat inside,

You spoil her looks. You singe her hide,

For if her coat is sleek and gay,

She won't stay by you half a day.

She'll escape and go a-calling.

Stretching, purring, caterwauling.

If I'm well dressed, to hear you rant,

I only mean to gallivant.

"Peet as you like and set your spics.

Call Argus with his hundred eyes,

To guard me as no other could.

I'd hoodwink Argus, if I would.

I could set his cap, I know.

"You say that three bad things work so

To plague men and destroy their mirth,

That no one can endure a fourth.<sup>3</sup>

I pray that Jesus blunt your knife!

You tell me that a hateful wife

Is one of these supreme mischances.

Say, are there never other answers

To your foul riddles, on my life,

Than those that denigrate a wife?

"You say a woman's love is hell,

A desert land without a well,

An unrestrained and raging fire

That burns its fuel and then desires

To spread as far as one can see.

350

*I Trm. 2.9*

360

*sent by Henz  
to guard lo**Prose 30.21 ff.  
370*

380

3. The four bad things: a servant in charge, a fool who eats well, an odious wife, and a handmaid who inherits from her mistress.

You say as worms consume a tree  
So does a wife consume a man—

A truth all husbands understand. . . ."

Friends, that's the way I dealt with strife,

I made those old men rue their life.

I damned their drinking and caprice.

I called on Jenkin and my niece,

To swear their charges were untrue.

Ah, Lord, the grief I put them through!

All innocent, as God is kind,

But, like a horse, I bit and whined.

Though guilty, I got off by squawking.

I cowed them with torrential talking.

The first in line is first to grind.

I started first and nagged them blind.

They'd confess (I'd growl and glower!)

Offenses quite beyond their power.

I'd damn their lust—and plump their egos—

When illness made them rasp and doze.

(How they managed to suppose

That I was jealous, heaven knows.)

I swore I only walked at night

To keep their fancy girls in sight.

That pretext won me hours of mirth.

We wives are fitted out at birth

For such deceiving. God supplies

Us arts to make men doubt their eyes.

Why, even now it makes me proud:

I beat them all, as I've allowed,

With tricks or force or loud complaints,

Or murmurs that would try a saint.

Their luck was even worse in bed.

I scolded so, they went in dread.

I'd leave the bed itself in pride

If they so much as touched my side

Before they had rewarded me.

Then I'd endure their nicery.

No doubt you understand this tale.

Prepare to pay; it's all for sale.

No empty hand can lure a hawk;

390

*i.e., at a mill*

400

410

420

45

For money, though, I'd never balk.  
I'd even feign an appetite,

*dried, old flesh*

Though bacon's far from my delight.  
And thus, my lords, I'd scold and mope,  
For though they sat beside the pope  
They'd get no peace at their own board.  
In short, I paid them word for word.

430

I swear by God omnipotent,  
I'll say in my last testament,  
I gave back every word I owed.

I made my tongue so sharp a goad  
They had to yield—I'd never cease—  
Or give up any hope of peace.

They snapped and snarled, you understand,  
But knew I had the upper hand.  
Then I would say, "Dear, don't be silly,  
Do what I say like our sheep, Willy.  
Come, husband, let me kiss your cheek.  
A good man should be mild and meek,  
Wrapped in patience like a robe.  
I've heard you say you honor Job;  
So bear with us, the ones you preach to.  
If not, depend on me to teach you  
How sweet peace is compared to strife.  
Now, you or I must rule our life.  
As men are mild, disposed to thought,  
Give way to me, dear, as you ought.  
Why must you always grouch and groan?  
Perhaps you want my crotch alone?  
Have it! Take it! Every bit!  
By God, I'm glad you relish it;  
If I should sell my sweet *belle chose*  
I'd walk as fresh as any rose.  
But, no, I keep it for your tooth.  
Your fears are groundless. That's the truth."  
Three husbands sank beneath such lore;  
Now let me speak of number four:  
Ah, that one was a reveler;  
That is to say, he had a paramour—  
And I was young and ripe for play,

440

440

450

*pretty thing*

460

Bold and strubborn as a jay.  
How I could dance! I wasn't frail.  
I'd ouising any nightingale  
When I had drunk a draught of wine.

Merellius, the Roman swine,  
Beat his poor wife to death for topping.  
Ha! I'd have cured his interloping!  
He never could bar *me* from wine!

Still, drinking leads to Venus' shrine,  
For just as sure as cold breeds hail,  
A liquorish mouth has a lecherous tail.  
A drunken woman has no defense—  
Ask lechers their experience!

470

But, Christ, when I look back and see  
My youth and strength and jollity,  
It tickles me, and well it should.  
Even now it does me good.  
I had the world once in my time.  
But age dims everything with grime.  
I've lost my beauty and my pith.  
So what? The Devil go therewith!  
The flour is gone now, sad to tell,  
But I still have the bran to sell.  
I'll still be genial and jocund.  
Now let me speak of my fourth husband.  
Although it gave me great despite,  
Some strumpet was his chief delight.  
But I got even, to his cost.  
I hung him on the selfsame cross,  
Not by adultery as such,  
But making people think as much.  
I fried the man in his own grease.  
His fancies seldom gave him peace.  
God sent me for his purgatory,  
For which I hope his soul's in glory.  
He sang for woe and hung his jaw.  
I was the shoe that rubbed him raw.  
God alone knows how I wrung him,  
Thwarted him, deceived him, strung him!  
When I'd been to Jerusalem,

480

490

500

(46)

He died, and so I buried him  
Beneath the rood screen in our church—<sup>4</sup>  
No Persian tomb. I didn't search  
For some Appelles' sepulture.

*Appelles designed the lavish tomb of Darius.*

Why spend a fortune to immure  
A man like him? Why be so brave?  
His coffin suits him in his grave.

Now of the fifth one let me tell.

510

I pray his soul is not in hell!

He was the sharpest one, God knows!

Why, even now I feel his blows

And will until my dying day,

But in our bed he was so gay,

And wheedled with so fine a grace

To pleasure me in his embrace

That though he beat on every bone,

He held my heart, and he alone.

I loved him best of all, for he

Withheld his love to punish me.

We women harbor, I'll not lie,

A strange and wayward fantasy:

Whatever we can't have at will,

We clamor for it, good or ill.

Forbid a thing, and we pursue it.

Approve of it, and we won't do it.

Some men act scornful to entice us

And thus inflate their asking prices.

Too cheap a conquest lacks appeal.

At least that's how most women feel.

530

My fifth man, then, God bless his spirit,

Was not a tycoon—nowhere near it.

No, he was once a clerk at Oxford,

And later he returned to board

With my best friend in all our town—

God save her soul—my Alison.

She knew my heart and secrets too

Far better than our priest could do.

<sup>4</sup> A screen, usually ornate, between the nave, or congregation's part of a church, and the choir, or chancel.

I'd tell her anything at all.

If my poor man pissed on a wall

Or did a thing that meant his life,

To her (and to one other wife,

And to my niece, whom I loved then)

I'd derail where and how and when.

I blabbed so often, by my head,

My husband's face was always red.

He knew no man of average sense

Would trust me with his confidence.

It happened that one time in Lent—

550

A season I as much as spent

With Alison to flirt and play

And gad abroad from March to May—

That Jenkin, Alison, and I

Walked out into the fields nearby.

My husband was in town that spring,

Which left me free as any king,

To see the people and be seen.

How could I live out what was fared,

Unless I went where it awaited?

So I embarked without discretion

On churchly vigils and processions

And pilgrim jaunts and Bible plays,

And sermons and gay wedding days,

And always in my scarlet gown.

No moth or worm in all our town

Could gnaw a hole in that array.

And why? I wore it every day!

Across the fields we tripped along,

Caught up in foolish play and song.

We blushed and mooned and flirted so

That I at last let Jenkin know

He was the man, and only he,

I'd wed if I were ever free.

For I'm the sort, sirs, understand,

Who's never caught without a plan

In love or in my other interests.

There's no heart in a mouse's breast

That has but one poor hole to hide him.

570

560

He's dead if that one hole's denied him.

I claimed he had enchanted me  
(My mother's brand of subtlety)

And said I dreamed of him all night—

He slew me as I lay upright

And all the bedclothes swam in blood,

But I took comfort in that flood,

For blood berokens gold, I thought.

A pack of lies, for I dreamed naught,

But spoke as Mother said I should.

Her love advice was always good.

But tell me, sirs, . . . what was I saying?

It's here, by God. My tale again!

When Husband Four was on his bier,

I moaned and groaned with sorry cheer,

As good wives must, for that's our place.

Yet I took care to hide my face.

Because I'd found another man,

My tears held back, as dry as sand.

Men bore the corpse to church next day

With neighbors sighing "Welladay!"

Jenkin himself was in the crowd

Behind the bier, and I allowed,

I'd never seen another pair

Of legs and feet so clean and fair.

I gave him all my heart to hold.

Now he was twenty winters old,

And I was forty; that's the truth.

I always had a young colt's tooth.

I had gap teeth, and that was fine.

Who else should wear Dame Venus' sign?<sup>5</sup>

By God, I was a lusty one,

Fair and rich, excelled by none,

And truly all my husbands said

My *quynt* was fit for any bed.

From birth the working of my stars

Was ruled by Venus and by Mars.

As Venus made me lecherous,

580

Mars made me bold and treacherous.

Born in the Bull when Mars was there,

Supplied with love and pluck to spare,

I followed every inclination

Thrust on me by my constellation.

That's why I never could withhold

My Venus box when well cajoled.

Yet I have Mars' mark on my face

And in another secret place.

As God may witness my confession,

I never used the least discretion,

But chose my men by appetite.

Short or tall or dark or light,

I never cared, if someone loved me,

How poor he was, or what degree.

What can I say? A few weeks later,

This pretty Jenkin, no one greater,

Married me with pomp and pleasure.

I gave him all my land and treasure,

All the gains I'd won before,

And afterward repented sore.

I'd ask for things. He wouldn't hear.

He cuffed me so upon the ear

(I ripped a leaf out of his book),

My ear went dead where I was struck.

But I was cross-grained as a cat

And talked him down in every spat.

I vowed I'd roam just as before,

No matter how he scowled and swore.

He paid me back, for he would quarry

His book for every hurtful story—

How Simplicius Gallus left his wife

And strayed away throughout his life.

He saw her bare head, nothing more,

When she was peeing out his door.

Another Roman, much the same,

Because his wife went to some game

Without his leave, he cast her off.

He'd also cite his favorite scoff

From sour Ecclesiasticus,

the constellation Taurus

620

this mark is unidentified

630

600

640

youthful desires

610

"lusty part"

650

Sempronius Sophus

5. Gaps between the teeth showed a lecherous disposition.

A proverb dripping with distrust  
Of wives who roam and gad about.<sup>6</sup>  
And next he'd trot old verses out:

"Who builds a house of willow switches,  
Rides a blind horse through dikes and ditches,  
And trusts his wife with other bitches,  
Should surely hang and lose his riches!"  
Such maxims aren't worth a haw.

Not this, nor all his other saws,  
Could ever make me feel corrected.  
I hate to have my faults detected,  
And so do other wives as well.

He'd gnash his teeth when I'd rebel,  
But I'd not give an inch, I promise.

Now let me tell, by holy Thomas,  
The reason I ripped out the page,  
For which he struck me in his rage.

He had some works that night and day  
He'd read aloud to my dismay:

Valerius and Theophrastus  
(Both hated women and harassed us);

Another clerk of ancient Rome,  
That cardinal now called Saint Jerome,  
Who wrote a tract against Jovinian;

Crispian and Terullian;  
Trotula, too; and Heloise  
(Yes, she affronted Church decrees);

The Parables of Solomon;  
And Ovid's *Art*—no more, I'm done.  
All these were bound in one great book,<sup>7</sup>

And all the time he could he took,  
Each time he had the least vacation  
From other worldly occupation,  
To read to me of wicked wives.

For he knew more bad women's lives

660

*hauborn-apple*

670

*ancient authors*

680

*Heloise had a famous affair with the  
priest Peter Abelard**The Art of Love*

690

6. Ecclesiasticus actually tells husbands to curb their wives' speech.

7. Jenkin's collection of antifeminist writings is unique, though manuscript books like it are known. Crispian may have been only a name to Chaucer. Trotula was a woman physician and not an antifeminist, though Chaucer may not have known that.

Then there are names in Holy Writ.  
No clerk will willingly admit  
That any good is found in wives,

Except in some saints' pious lives.  
They slander us. You know they do.  
Who paints the lion, tell me, who?<sup>8</sup>

By God, if women wrote these tales,  
As clerks do, or some other males,  
We'd hear more of men's wickedness

Than all their gender could redress.  
Scholars are ruled by Mercury.  
That god and Venus don't agree.

He favors scholarship and reason.  
She loves excess in any season.  
That's why his star sign hovers low

When hers puts on its greatest show.  
Thus Mercury is on the lees  
When Venus rules the sky in Pisces,<sup>9</sup>

And Venus falls as he is raised,  
And women leave most clerks unfazed.  
When clerks are old and cannot do

Dame Venus' labor worth a shoe.  
They all endeavor to disparage  
The female sex along with marriage.

But, as I said, it was my luck  
To lose my hearing for a book!  
Once Jenkin sat beside his fire

Reading like a country squire,  
Of Eve, who for her appetite  
Caused all of us to share the blight

For which the Son of God was slain  
And bought us with his blood again.  
Of course, it was a she who thus

Loosed sin and death on all of us.  
And then he read of Samson's hairs.

8. A man in a fable shows a lion a picture of a man killing a lion. "Ah," says the lion, "who painted that, a man or a lion?"

9. Venus is dominant in Pisces, and the influence of Mercury is at its lowest then. In Virgo the positions are reversed.

His lover moved them with her shears,  
And that cost Samson both his eyes.

And next he read me, if you please,  
Of Deianira and Hercules.

She made him beg for death's release.<sup>10</sup>

Then he declaimed another piece  
About the wife of Socrates.

Xanthippe drenched his head with piss.

He scarcely knew what was amiss

But said, as he wiped off the strain,

"She thunders yet, but here's the rain."

Pasiphaë the Queen of Crete

Was one of Jenkin's favorite treats.

Eugh! That was a grisly story—

The crown of all his oratory!

Clytemnestra's lechery

And how she killed her spouse with glee

Got our Jenkins full attention.

Then too, he rarely failed to mention

Amphiaras, who lost his life

Through the actions of his wife,

Eriphyle. A clasp of gold

Was all it took, and he was sold.

She told his foemen where he was.

They killed him, but she was the cause.

Livia and Lucilla next;

Each one cost her man his neck—

One for love and one for hate.

Livia despised her mare;

And poisoned him, his mortal foe.

Lucilla loved her husband, though.

To hold him fast, she took a notion:

To make him drink a true-love potion.

He was dead before the morrow.

Thus all wives bring their husbands sorrow.

He told me how Latunius

Complained to his friend Arrius

730

*She made love to a bull.*

740

*Agamemnon*

750

*Dryas*

*the poor Lucretius*

760

10. By accident. Nessus, a dying centaur, tricked her into smearing a robe with his blood. When Hercules put it on, the robe clung to his skin and set him afire.

That in his garden on one tree

His wives had hung themselves, all three,

Each one with a broken heart.

"Hoo!" said Arrius, "For my part,

Give me a slip of that same tree

To see if it will work for me."

Concerning later wives, he read

How some had killed their men in bed

And frolicked with a paramour;

Their husbands dead upon the floor.

Some drove nails through their men's brains

And watched the blood drip from their veins,

Or else put poison in their drink.

He spoke more harm than you can think.

And then he'd start rehearsing proverbs.

They sprang up in his head like herbs.

"You'd be," he said, "far less at risk

With lions or a basilisk,

Than with a woman prone to chide."

"Climb up on the roof and hide,"

He said, "from angry wives below.

They're always fractious, as you know.

They hate whatever their men love."

And "A woman's shame is like a glove:

It slides right off her with her smock."

And "A fair face in the Devil's flock

Is a golden ring in a old sow's nose."

I swear to you no nonwife knows

How my rage grew with each new libel.

I saw he'd never quit his bible,

His bale of lies, his book of sages,

So I reached out and snatched three pages

Clean from the book, beneath his nose.

I hit him too, you may suppose,

So he fell backward in the fire.

Up he jumped—his rage was dire—

And punched me roundly in the head.

Lord! I collapsed and acted dead.

Now when he saw how still I lay,

He made as if to run away,

*deadly serpents of myth*

*Eccles. 15.16*

*Prov. 21.9*

790

*Prov. 11.22*

800





But I began to stir instead.

"You've killed me now, false thief," I said,  
"Robbed and murdered, what a crime!  
But come and kiss me one last time."

He ventured near and knelt beside me,  
And said, "No matter what beides me,  
I'll never buffer you again.

You pushed till I was half insane.  
Forgive me, dear, that's all I seek."

By God, I clubbed him on the cheek!  
And said, "There, thief, accept your pay!  
I'm dead. I have no more to say."

But, still, at length with care and tact  
We found our roles and made a pact.  
He put the bridle in my hand,

The government of house and land,  
And of his tongue and his behavior.  
We burnt his book, as God's my savior.

And when I gathered in to me  
All the rule and sovereignty,  
And when he said, "My own true wife,

Do as you will throughout your life:  
Preserve your name and my possessions"—  
We had no more head-knocking sessions.

As God's my hope, I was as kind  
As any wife you'll ever find,  
And true to him, and he to me.

I pray great God in majesty  
May bathe his soul in heaven's glory:  
And now, sirs, I will tell my story.

830

## WORDS BETWEEN THE SUMMONER AND THE PRIAR

The Friar laughed to hear all this.

"Good Dame," he said, "upon my bliss,  
A long preamble to a tale!"

The Summoner broke in like a gale:

"Lo," he said, "for all God's care,

810

A friar jumps in anywhere.  
A fly and a friar, if you wish,  
Will try their luck in any dish.

What do you know of preambulation?  
Trot, shut up, or go sit down!  
Don't thrust your nose in others' sport."

The Friar had a hot retort:  
"Faith," he said, "before I go,  
I'll tell a comic tale or so

To make us laugh at your disgrace."  
The Summoner said, "Well, damn your face,  
And damn your gall, and God damn me,

850

If I don't venture two or three  
Of friars before Siringbourne,  
Each guaranteed to make you mourn.

I see that you can't take a joke."  
"Peace!" said the Host, "or may you choke!  
Now let this woman tell her tale.

You speak like farm hands drunk on ale.  
Dame, tell your story, for the best."

"I will," said she, "at your behest,  
If I have license of this Friar."  
"Tell on," he said, "that's my desire."

860

## THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

Once in good King Arthur's days,  
Which Britons now revere and praise,  
Fairies filled our pleasant land.

The elf-queen and her gay command  
Danced on many a vernal mead—  
Or most men think they did, indeed—

Many hundred years ago.  
But now they're gone, as all men know.  
For now the great deserts and prayers

Of mendicants and other friars  
Who wander all the fields and streams  
Like mores that swarm in bright sunbeams,

870

forty miles from London

Blessing chambers, halls, and bowers,  
 Cities, boroughs, castles, towers,  
 Towns and barns, stables, dairies,  
 Have routed out those ancient faeries.  
 For everywhere there was an elf,  
 You look and, lo, the friar himself!  
 Going about, he prays and sings  
 His mains and his holy things  
 On his way to beg and bless.  
 But women now are safe, I guess.  
 Behind each bush and every tree,  
 There is no incubus but he,  
 And he will just subvert our virtue.

This Arthur I alluded to  
 Retained a lusty bachelor

Who went one day along a shore  
 And happened, riding on his own,  
 To meet a maid, like him, alone.

He threw her down, with little said,  
 And robbed her of her maidenhead.

This villain's work raised such a pother  
 That soon it reached the court and Arthur,  
 Who damned the boorish knight to die.  
 His head must roll—nowhere to fly!

Perhaps that's what the statutes said.  
 The queen had other plans instead

And asked her husband for the knight,  
 To punish him as she thought right.

The courteous king gave up the man  
 To live or die at her command.

She thanked the king for what he gave,  
 Then pondered how to treat the knave.

"See here," she told him, "how your tricks,  
 Have put you in this wretched fix.

Your life is forfeit, sir; it's mine.  
 I send you on a quest to find

What one thing women most desire.  
 Fail me, and your fate is dire.

I won't demand your answer now.  
 No, I'll have mercy and allow

880

*seductive spite*

890

900

910

The coming year for you to try  
 To find the single best reply.  
 Come swear to this, and vow to be  
 Back here in time to answer me."

The man was in a sorry plight.  
 His queen was well within her right.  
 He had no reason to protest,

And so he undertook the quest.  
 He prayed that God would save his neck,  
 But feared he'd have a pointless trek.

He left the court and took his way  
 In hope someone he met might say  
 What every woman most preferred.

But nothing that he ever heard  
 Convinced him that his trial was passed.  
 Each one he asked belied the last.

Some said that women lived for wealth.  
 Some said honor; some said health.  
 Some lust in bed; some, clothes and goods;

Some said frequent widowhoods.  
 Some said that our hearts are eased  
 When we are humored, praised, and pleased.

That's close to true, it seems to me,  
 For women thrive on flattery.  
 A sycophant who comes on call

Delights most women, great or small.  
 Some said we never rest until  
 We're free to do just as we will,

And no man dares dispraise our habits,  
 But says we live like pious abbots.  
 That covers most of us indeed,

For when men pay unseemly heed  
 To our shortcomings, we will bite.  
 Try if you will. You'll find I'm right.

For be what women may within,  
 We won't admit the smallest sin.  
 Still others said our favorite treat

Is being held to be discreet,  
 Trustworthy in affairs as well,  
 Aware of things we'll never tell.

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Sirs, that thought's hardly worth a flea.  
No woman honors privacy.  
Midas' story proves that's so.

The tales of Ovid plainly show  
That Midas had, beneath his hair,  
Two ass's ears—an ugly pair  
Of defects that he sought to hide  
To keep his place and save his pride.<sup>11</sup>  
Only his wife had seen his ears.  
He trusted her for all his fears  
And placed her in his confidence.  
(This showed his basic lack of sense.)

She swore, "No! Not for all of Greece,  
Would I destroy my husband's peace  
And undercut his kingly name!  
Besides, I'd have to share the shame."  
But nonetheless she almost died  
Keeping this piece of news inside.  
The secret swelled and pressed her heart  
Till she must tell at least a part;

And since she couldn't tell a man,  
Away into a marsh she ran.  
Her breast burned so it seemed on fire,  
And, as a bittern dabs in mire,

Down to the water went her lips.  
"Don't tell a soul or let this slip,"  
She said. "Make certain no one hears:  
*My husband has two ass's ears!*"

If she'd not let her secret out,  
It would have stifled her, no doubt.  
You see, we women might delay,  
But all we know comes out someday.  
For what became of Midas' ears,  
Read Ovid, where the tale appears.  
Back now to our oafish knight.  
For all his wandering day and night,

*Metamorphoses, xi*

11. Midas was given these ears for preferring Pan's music to Apollo's. In Ovid, however, Midas is betrayed not by his wife, but by a slave. His slave whispers the secret in a hole and covers it up, but reeds grow from the place and announce it to the world.

He couldn't find what women wanted.  
Conflicting answers had him daunted.  
He must go home; the time was nigh.  
The queen awaited his reply.

But on the way he chanced to ride  
Beside a forest where he spied  
About two dozen lovely maids  
Dancing in the woodland glades.  
He made toward the girls to ask  
If they could help him with his task.

But when they saw him riding there,  
They vanished lightly into air,  
And on the green, sir, by my life,  
There sat an ancient, loathsome wife.  
A fouler sight you'll never see.  
She scrambled up beside his knee

And cackled, "Sir, there's no path here.  
But what explains your sorry cheer?  
Tell me, young man, what you need.  
Old heads like mine are wise indeed."

"Dearest mother," said the knight,  
"I have to learn before tonight  
What women want. I need advice.  
If you can say, just name your price."

"Ah, that I could," she said, "but shant  
Unless you swear to me you'll grant  
The next request I send your way,  
And you will hear it, lad, today."

"Done, mother," said the knight, "I swear."  
"Then," she said, "You're in my care.  
Your life is safe, as you will see.

The queen herself must side with me.  
The proudest wife who wears a gown  
Cannot deny my answer's sound.  
They can't dispute what I will say.  
Let's go and face the court today.  
She whispered something in his ear,  
And said, "That's all it is, my dear."  
They rode to court, not far away.  
The knight relieved to keep his day.

*wedding bird*

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He had his answer pat, he said,  
Full many a wife and many a maid,  
Full many a widow (for they're wise)  
Sat with the queen in her assize.  
They gathered there for his response,  
While he affected nonchalance.

It soon grew quiet in the court.  
The knight stood by with his retort—  
The thing that women love the best—  
Observing silence like the rest.  
The high queen beckoned, and he spoke,  
Standing stoutly, like an oak.

"My lady, most of all," said he,  
"You women value sovereignty:  
To rule your husband or your love  
To do your will. By God above,  
That's your wish, although you kill me.  
I'm at your mercy, as you see."

In all the court, no wife or maid  
Could disapprove of what he said.  
They all agreed he'd won his life,  
And on that cue up spoke the wife  
Whom he had met upon the green.

"Mercy," she said, "My lady! Queen!  
Before you leave, grant me my right.  
I taught that answer to this knight,  
And in return at my behest

He said he'd grant my next request.  
He vowed to do it if he could.

And now, sir, make your promise good:  
Take me to you as your wife.  
For as you know, I saved your life.  
Is that not so? What do you say?"

But all he said was "Welladay!  
I know as well as you I promised,  
But, for God's love, change your request.  
Take all my goods, but let me go!"  
"I won't," she said, "by Scorpio,  
For though I'm old and foul and poor,  
Not for all the gold and ore

Beneath the earth or here above  
Will I forbear to be your love."

"My love!" he said. "No, my damnation!  
No other man of my relations  
Has ever tasted such disgrace!"

But nothing worked. This was his case:  
He was well caught; now he must wed  
And take that old wife to his bed.

Well, some might think it mean of me  
That I neglect, as you will see,  
To tell the joy and rich array

That dignified their feast that day.  
But here's my answer, short and plain:  
There was no joy that day, just pain

And heaviness and gnawing sorrow.  
They wed in secret on the morrow.  
The knight hid all day like an owl.

His life was ruined. She was so foul.  
Still greater woe welled in his head  
That night when she was in his bed.

He writhed and wallowed to and fro.  
His wife lay sweetly smiling though,  
And said, "Now, benedicty,

Is this the way a knight should be?  
Is this the law of Arthur's house?  
Are his knights so fastidious?

I am your own, your loving wife,  
The lady, sir, who saved your life.  
I'm sure I never did you wrong.

So, sweetheart, why hold back so long?  
You're like a man who's lost his wit.  
If I'm to blame, why, out with it,

And I'll amend things right away."  
"Amend?" he said, "and how, I pray?  
By God, I'll never be consoled,

You are so loathly and so old!  
You're low born, too. No family.  
What else could you expect from me?

The heart will burst within my breast!"  
"And this," she said, "prompts your unrest?"

"It does," he said, "and so it should."

"Well," she said, "my dear, I could  
Correct all this within three days  
If you adopted kinder ways."

"But do you think that gentleness  
Is just old money, more or less,  
And that's what makes you gentlemen?  
Bah! That conceit's not worth a hen!  
The virtuous man who works each day,  
In town, alone, in every way,  
To do what gentle deeds he can,  
Sir, he's the world's true gentleman."

A Christian's goodness comes from Christ,  
And not rich elders, duly priced.  
Though they may leave their wealth and fees,  
And old, deep-rooted family trees,  
They can't pass on their virtuous lives,  
The reason that their fame survives,  
And their true value, if we know it.

"Just listen to the princely poet,  
Dante, who has this to say;  
At least his thinking runs this way:  
'Men seldom rise by human virtue;  
Success falls under God's purview.  
To him we owe our gentleness.  
And all true men will say no less.'  
Goods, sir, are all that we inherit,  
And goods may work against our merit."

"You shouldn't have to learn from me  
If virtue flourished naturally  
In families, right down the line,  
You'd never see a large decline  
From goodness and true gentleness.  
Each child would match his parents' best."

"Take fire into the darkest house  
From England to the Caucasus,  
And shut the door and go away.  
The fire will burn on anyway,  
As bright as if a thousand watched,

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*Purgatorio 7:121-3*

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For fire is fire and won't be scorched—  
No, *can't* be scorched until it dies.

"True gentleness is not a guise,  
Nor does it come with wealth and lands;  
Rich men may shirk its stern demands.  
It's not a fire that always burns."

No, every generation learns  
A lord's son may do villainy.

A man who claims nobility  
Because he's from a noble house,  
Whose forebears honored all their vows,  
And yet won't do a gentle deed

Or pay his own best models heed,  
Why, he's not gentle, duke or earl—  
He's just a rich but common churl.

Think of this: the glowing fame  
Of your august and ancient name,  
Owes not a blessed thing to you.

Now, God may make you gentle too,  
But that rides on his will and grace.  
It's not a perquisite of place.

"You'll find a noble in Valerius,  
A countryman called Tullius,

Who scarcely owed his clan a thing,  
Yet rose from herdsman to be king.  
Read Seneca, Boethius,

The doctrine they bequeathed to us  
Is 'Gente is as gentle does.'

A lowborn wife's no curse because  
High God may grant, as birth can't do,  
That she may be both good and true.

A woman's only gentle when  
She lives in virtue, not in sin.

"You charge me next with poverty,  
Well, Christ, who ransomed you and me,  
Chose to live among the poor;

And every Christian heretofore  
Has known that Jesus, Heaven's king,  
Would hardly choose a vicious thing.

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*third king of Rome*

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(55)

Of course, glad poverty is best,  
As men like Seneca attest.  
A self content in poverty

Is rich, though some might disagree.  
The man who covers things is poor,  
For wants spring up around his door.  
But one with neither things nor wants  
Is rich for all your lordship's taunts.  
Welcome poverty is gay.

Juvenal has this to say:  
"Poor men are always free to sing;  
As safe from thieves as any king."  
Poverty is harsh but good;

It makes men work as few things could  
And offers priceless education  
To those who master resignation.  
And though it can depress and daunt,  
A gift that no one else would want,  
Poverty can be the prod

That makes man know himself and God.  
Then too it is a looking glass  
Through which you see false friends, alas.  
You're right, I'm poor. That much is true.  
But, sir, I'm quite as good as you.

"Then too, you jeer because I'm old.  
The soundest books and thinkers hold  
That old age should be revered—  
Certainly not glibed against.  
Old folks deserve one's veneration.  
This holds for every time or nation.

"You say I'm foul. My lord, that's true.  
Why then, don't fear I'll cuckold you,  
For wrinkles and senility  
Are sovereign guards to chastity.  
Yet I'll take pity on your plight  
And cater to your appetite.

"Sir, you may have me as you please:  
Foul and old at all degrees,  
But yet a true and humble wife,

1190  
trusted stay throughout your life;  
O'young and fair and doubtless wild,  
So you must fear you'll be beguiled,  
And likely will be when I roam

Or when you think I'm safe at home.  
Now which arrangement suits you best?"

The knight looked harried and oppressed.  
Consternation made him say:

"You tell me, lady, I'll obey.

I'll gladly follow your direction.  
Choose yourself upon reflection  
What's advantageous for us both.

I won't object, upon my oath.

What you think best will do for me."

"Ah," she said, "full mastery!

I hold the reins, no second guessing?"

"Indeed," he said, "and with my blessing."

"Kiss me," she said, "and don't be loath,

For from today I will be both—

That is to say, both good and fair.

For may I die in black despair

If I don't stay as good and true

As any wife you ever knew.

And if I'm not as fair of feature

This selfsame night as any creature

Between the farthest east and west,

Why, kill me, dear, at my behest.

Draw the curtain, now, and see."

He looked at her, and verily

She was so young and beauteous,

He clasped her in a glad caress.

He seemed to hear the heavens chime,

He kissed her face a thousand times,

And she complied with every measure

That might increase his joy and pleasure.

They lived in joy throughout their lives.

Now, sirs, may Jesus send all wives

Meek husbands who are fresh in bed

And strength to rule them when we wed.

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