

GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE*

PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH PROSE TRANSLATION BY TAYLOR M. CONLEY, HANNAH GUNNELL, AND CAROLYN WOODRUFF

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The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Experience, though no written authority was in this world, is right enough for me to speak of woe that is in marriage. Servents, from the time that I was twelve years of age, thanks be to God that is enteral on life, that I have had five husbands at the church door— If I so often had been wedded— and all were worthy men in their degree. I was told, certainly, it's not long since Christ never went once on his way to the wedding in Canna of Galilee, that by the same example taught me that I should be wedded only once. Here also, a sharp word for the purpose beside a well, that Jesus, God and Man, spoke in reprieve of the Samaritan: "How have you had five husbands?", said he, "And that man that now has you, is that your husband?"— thus said he, certainly. What he meant by that I cannot say, but I ask why the fifth man was not husband to the Samaritan? How many might she have in marriage? Yet I have never heard talk in my age of this number's definition. Men may speculate and interpret, up and down, but well I know, explicitly, without lie, God asked for us to go forth and multiply. I can well understand that gentil text. Also well I know, he said that my husband should leave father and mother and take to me, but he made no mentions of numbers, bigamy, or marriage eight times. Why then do men speak ill of it?

Here, the wise king Solomon, I am sure that he had more than one wife. As to God, it seems legitimate to me to be refreshed half so often as he. What a gift from God he had, all his wives! No man has such that is alive today. God knows, this noble king, who in my opinion, the first night had many a marry bout which each of them, so he [the king] was happy with his life. Blessed be to God that I have wedded five, of which I picked out the best, both of their testicles, and of their chest. Diverse schools make perfect clerks, and diverse practice makes in many different works makes the workman perfect, certainly. I have studied five husbands, and welcome the sixth whenever he shall come. For truth, I will not keep yourself chase in all; for when my husband is gone from the world, some Christan man will marry me again. For then, the apostles say I am free to wed, in God's name wherever I like. He says to be wedded is not a sin, " Better to be wedded than to burn." What care is it to me, the folks say villainy of wicked Lamech and his bigamy? I know well that Abraham was a holy man, and Jacob as well if ever I know, and each of them had more than two wives, and so did many other holy men. Where can you say, in any age, that high God defended marriage by express word? I pray you, tell me. Or where he commanded virginity, I know as well as you, there is no doubt, the apostle when he speaks of maidenhead¹ he said he has no precepts of it. Men may counsel a woman to become single, but counselling a woman is no commandment: God put it in out own judgment. For had God commanded maidenhead, then he damned the wedding in doing so. And if there were no seed sown, from what would virginity grow? Paul does not command, at the least, a thing of which his master gave no command. The prize is set up for virginity, let him catch it who can, who runs best.

¹ Virginity.

But this word is not understood as being about every person, but that God is pleased with his might. I know well the apostle was a virgin, but nonetheless he wrote and said he wishes that every person were like him, it is all no more than counselling to embrace virginity. And to have been a wife he gave me faith as a concession; so it is no disgrace to wed me if my spouse dies, without the objection of bigamy. Although it would be a good thing to touch no woman—he means is in bed or couch—for it is perilous to assemble both fire and flax, you know that this metaphor may resemble. This is the long and short of it: he held virginity more perfect than marriage in frailty. Frailty, called I, if he and she were to lead their whole lives in chastity. I grant it well, I have no envy, though maidenhead takes precedence over bigamy. They like to be clean in body and spirit. If my estate I will make no boast, for well you know that a Lord in his household doesn't have every vessel made of gold. Some are made of wood and their lord service. God called folks to him in different ways, some this, some that, as he likes to determine.

Virginity is a great perfection, and continence also with devotion. But Christ, who is a perfect source, but did not command every person should go sell all that he has and give it to the poor and in turn, follow him in his footsteps. He spoke to them that would live perfectly; and lords by your faith, that is not me. I will bestow the prime of my life to the acts and fruits of marriage.

Tell me also, to what purpose were generations created, and fashioned so by a perfectly wise maker, made to not be used?

Let anyone who wants to add to the argument, and say all sides, that they were made for the discharge of urine, and both small things were also created to know a female from a male, and for no other cause—you say no? The experience knows well it is not so. So that the clerks are not angry with me I will say this: that they were made for both — that is to say for function (of discharge of urine) and for procreation, so that we will not displease God. Why should men otherwise set in their books, that man should pay to his wife her debt? Now how should he make his payment if he uses his blessed tool? They were put upon a creature to purge urine and also for procreation.

But I say that not every person is obliged who has such equipment as I told you, to go and use them for procreation— then men shouldn't care about chastity. Christ was a virgin, created as a man, and many a saint since the beginning of time, and they lived ever in perfect chastity. I will not envy virginity; let them be the bread of refined wheat seed, and let us wives be called barley bread—and yet with barley bread, Mark tells us, our Lord Jesus refreshed many a man. In such estate as God has called us, I will persevere, I am not hard to please. In wifeness, I will use my instrument as generously as my maker had it sent. If I am barbaric, God give me sorrow. My husband shall have it both evening and morning when he wants to come forth and pay his debt. I will have a husband, I will not delay, which shall be both my debtor and my slave, and have his tribulation besides upon his flesh, while I am his wife. I have the power during all my life over his proper body, and not he. Right as the apostle told it unto me, and told our husbands to love us well. This entire sentence is pleasing to me, every bit.

The Pardoner leapt up at once “Now dame,” he said “By God and Saint John, you are a noble preacher in this case! I was about to be wed to a wife, allas! What! Should I pay for it on my flesh so dear? Yet I would rather wed no wife this year!”

“Abide,” she said. “My tale has not begun. No, you shall drink of another before when I go, one that will taste worse than ale. And when I have told you my tale of tribulation in marriage, of which I have been an expert in all my life— this is to say that I myself have been the whip— Then may you choose where you will sip of the barrel that I will tap. Be wary of it, before you are too near to it. I will share more than then examples. “Ho that will not take warning from other men, shall be corrected by other men. These same words are written by Ptolemy; read in is *Almageste* and take it there.”

“Dame, I would pray you if it were your will” said the Pardoner. “As you begin to tell your tale, hold back for no man, and teach us young men of your practice.”

“Gladly,” She said “I hope it is as you like it. But yet I ask all the company, if that I speak according to my whim you will not take grief with what I say, for my intent is nothing but to have fun.

“Now sir, I will now tell you my tale. As I drink more wine or ale I shall say the truth: of the husbands that I had, three of them were good, and two bad. Three men were good, and rich, and old. With great labour they could fulfil their obligations— You know what I mean by this, my God! And help me God, I laugh when I think of how I made them work at night. And by my faith set no store by it. They had given me their land and their treasure; I need no longer to do my diligence. To win their love, and show them respect. They loved me so well, by God above, that I set no store by their love. A wise woman will work hard, even when single, to get herself love where as she has none. But since I had them whole in my hand, and since they had given me all their land, why should I be concerned about pleasing them, since it was for my profit and ease? I set them to work, by my faith, and many nights they sang “woe is me?” The bacon was not fetched for them, I believe, that some men had in Essex at Dunmow I ruled them so well with my law, that each of them was very blissful and eager to bring me fair things. They were very glad when I spoke to them nicely. For God knows I scolded them mercilessly. “Now know that I behaved characteristically. You wise wives that can understand, you should speak and make false accusations against them.

“For no man can swear and lie half as boldly as a woman can. I say this not with respect to wives that have been wise, expect when they are misguided. If a wise wife knows that is to her advantage, she will maintain that the man is mad. She should make witnesses of her connivance — as here I say. ‘The old dottard is not behaving well. Why is my neighbor’s wife so finely dressed? She is honored whenever she wants, but I sit at home with no fine clothes. What happens at my neighbor's house? Is she so fair? Are they so in love? Why do you whisper with our maid, benedicte? Sir, you are an old lecher, let your tricks be! If I have an intimate friend, without guilt you nag like a fiend if we walk or play in this house. You come home drunk as a mouse. You preach on your bench, with bad luck to you! You say it to me, it is a great calamity. To wed a poor woman, for costs, and if she is right, of high birth, you say that is a torment, to differ her pride and her anger. And if she is fair, though very poor born, you say that every lecher will have her. She cannot abide in chastity who is assailed upon every side.

“You say that some desire us for our riches, some for our shape, some for our fairness, and some because she can either sing or dance, and some for gentleness and diligence, and some for their slender hands and arms— Thus goes to the devil by your account! You say men cannot keep a castle well, and it may so long be assailed all about it. And if she is foul you say that she covets every man that she may see, for like a spaniel she will leap on him all about till she finds another man; As the grey goose goes to the lake, she will be without a mate. You say that is a hard thing for her to control, a thing that no man, with thanks, has held. You say, rouge, when you go to bed, and no wise man needed to wed, that no man has strived to get to heaven with wild thunder and fiery lightning, their withered neck will be broken! You say that leaking houses, smoke, and scolding wives made men flee out of their own house, bless me, what makes her scold an old man? You say we wives will hide our vices until we are tied down in marriage, then we will show them. That may be the proverb of a rascal. “you say that oxen, donkeys, horses, and hounds have been used at different times, basins and bowls before men use them, spoons and stools at such household goods, and so be pots and clothes and finery, but people do not try out wives, you old dotted rascal. And then you say we’ll show our vices.

You also say that it displeases me, but you praise my beauty, and unless you gaze intently on my face, and call me “fair dame” in every place. Unless you have a feast on the same day that I was born, and make me feel fresh and happy, and unless you honor my nurse, and to my chambermaid within my room and my father's people and his allies; thus you say old barrel full of dregs!

And yet, our apprentice Jenkin for his curly hair that shines like gold so fine, and because he escorts me both up and down, yet have you caught a false suspicion. I do not want him, though you were dead tomorrow.

But tell me this, why do you hide with bad luck, the keys of your chest away from me? Is my good not as good as yours, by God! What, do you expect to make an idiot of our dame? Now by the lord that is called St. James, you should not both, though you are furious, be master of my body and my goods. You must forgo one, in spite of yourself, why do you need to ask or spy? I trust that you would like to lock to me in your safe. You should say “wife, go where you like.” Go and enjoy the entertainment, I will not believe any tales they tell about you. I know that you are a true wife, “Dame Alice.” We do not like men who are concerned about where we go. We want to be free.

Of all men blessed may he be, the wise astrologer Lord Ptolemy, who says this proverb in his *Almageste*, “Of all men, he whose wisdom is the highest is the one who does not care who in the world he has control over.” By this proverb, you should understand that if you have enough why would you take note or care of how merrily other folks fare. For certainly, old dottard fool, by your leave, you should have for fill of sex right at evening. He is too great a fool that would refuse a man to light a candle at his lantern; He shall never have less light, by God! If you have enough, you do not need to complain.

You say also, if you make ourselves happy with clothing and finery, that it is the danger of our chastity. And yet— with bad luck to you— you must defend your argument, and these wise words in the apostle's name: “In clothing made with chastity and shame, you women should adorn yourselves,” he said “And not with tressed hair, and happy precious stones, such as pearls, or gold, or fine clothes. In accordance with the text, nor after according to your argument, I will not do as much as a gnat.

You say this, like I was a cat, for who would singe a cat's skin, then the cat would dwell in his den; If the cat's skin was nice and sleek, she would not dwell in her home more than half the day, but she would go forth before dawn, to show her skin and yowl like a cat in heat. This is to say, that if I be happy, sir scoundrel, that I will run out to show my poor clothes. Sir, old fool, what help is it to spy? Thou you pray to Argus² with his hundred eyes, to be his bodyguard as best he can, in faith, he shall not keep me expect as I please; Yet I could deceive him so I can prosper.

You also said that there are three things, the things that trouble all this earth, and no one can endure the fourth. Oh scoundrels, Jesus shorten your life! Yet you preach and say a hateful wife is called one of these misfortunes. Are there no other resemblances that you can use in your sayings without a poor wife being one of them?

You compare a woman's love to hell, a barren land where no water dwells. You compare it to a wildfire, the more in burns, the more it has desire to consume everything that will be burned. You say, just a worms shred a tree, so a wife destroys her husband; they who are bound to their wives.

Lords, right here, as you have understood, I swore his name to my only husband's hand, and that they say in their drunknesses, and all was false, but I took witness of Jankin, and on my niece also. O Lord! The pain I gave them and the woe, they were guiltless by God's sweet pain! For like a horse I could bite and whinny. I could complain, and yet it was in the wrong or else often times I would have been

² Giant from greek mythology.

ruined. Whoever comes first to the mill first grinds. I complained first, so our war was ended. They were glad to excuse themselves quickly of things they were never guilty of in their lives. Of wenches I would falsely accuse them, for when they were sick they could not stand.

Yet I tickled his heart, for he believed that I had great affection for him! I swore that all my walking out by night was to spy out the wenches with whom he delights; under the pretence that I had many mirth for such is given us in our birth; deceit, weeping and spinning God has given to women kindly, while they may live, and this one this I boast: At the end I had better in every degree by trickery, or force, or something similar in manner, as my continual grumbling or grouching. Namely in bed they had misfortune; there I would scold and do them no pleasure. I would no longer abide if I felt his arm over my side. Until he had bought me off; then I would allow him to do his foolishness, and there every tale I tell this man, anyone can profit for all is for sale. One can lure no hawks with an empty hand, for I will endure his lust for profit. He gives me a feigned appetite, but I never delight in old meat.

That made me so I would quarrel with them, for though they sat beside the Pope, I would not spare them at their own table, for, by my truth, I paid them, word for word. So help me true God omnipotent, though right now I should make my testament, I do not owe them a word that has not been repaid. I bought it so about my cleverness that they must give it up, as for the best, or else had we never been in rest. For although he looked as furious as a lion, he would fall short of his goal. Then I'd say, "My dear take note. How meekly you look Willy, our sheep. Come near, my spouse, let me kiss your cheek. You should be patient and meek, and have a mild disposition. As you preach of Job's patience. Suffer always, since you can preach it so well. But if you do, certainly we shall teach you that it is fair to have a wife in peace. One of us two must bow, no doubt, and because a man is more reasonable than a woman, you must bear to suffer. What ails you to grumble and groan? Is it because you want my vagina for yourself? Why take it all, have every bit of it! By St Peter, damn you, if you don't enjoy it! For if I would sell my thingummy, I could walk as fresh as a rose, but I would keep it for your own pleasure. You are to blame, by God; I'm telling you the truth." Such words we were occupied with.

Now, I will speak of my fourth husband. My fourth husband was a revelor, this is to say, he had a mistress. And I was young and full of high spirits, stubborn and strong, and lively as a magpie. I could dance to a small harp and sing as any nightingale when I drank sweet wine. Metellius,³ the foul layman, the swine had killed his wife with a staff because she drank wine, though I had been his wife, he should not have frightened me away from drinking. And after wine, on Venus must I think, for as surely as cold gave way to hail, a gluttonous mouth must have a lecherous tail. A woman can find no defense [in the Bible]; This lechers know from experience. But, Lord Christ, when I remember my youth and my liveliness, it tickles me to the bottom of my heart. And to this day, it does my heart good to know that I have had the world in my time, but age, alas, that poison, has taken my beauty and my vigour. Let go, farewell, but Devil go with you. The flower is gone, there is no more to tell. I must sell the bran as best as I can. But yet I would find happiness.

Now will I tell you of my fourth husband. I say, I resented that he had another mistress. But he was paid back by God and St. Judoc!⁴ I made him a cross of the same wood — not of my body and in no foul manner. But certainly, I acted in such a friendly way to people that I made him fry in the grease of his own anger and jealous behavior. By God, on Earth I was his purgatory! For which I hope his soul be

³ Metellius was an ancient man who killed his wife for drinking wine.

⁴ A priest whose body was incorruptible. His followers continuously cut his hair after his death.

in glory. For God knows, he sat very often and complained, and his shoe fit him wrong.⁵ There was no person save God but he that knew all the painful ways that I twisted him. He died when I came from Jerusalem, and was buried under the rood beam.⁶ His tomb was not as elaborate as Darius' sepulcher,⁷ which that Appelles hammered out subtly. It is only a waste to give him an expensive tomb. Let him fare well, God give his soul rest! He's now in his grave, and in his coffin.

Now is my fifth husband will I tell. God let his soul never come in hell! And yet to me, he was the most wicked — I felt that on my ribs row by row, and always will until my dying day. But in our bed he was so fresh and gay, and therewithal so well could he make me cajole, When that he would have my thingummy, that although he had beaten my every bone, he could win again, my love, immediately. It's true, I loved him best, for that his love was dangerous to me. We women have, that I won't lie, in this matter a strange fantasy: whatever thing, we may not easily have, thereafter, would we cry all day and crave. Forbid us something, and we desire; urge us to fast, and then will we flee. We display our wares reluctantly; a great crowd at the market will make expensive goods, and to cheapen the price is to belittle the value. Every wise woman knows this.

My fourth husband — God bless his soul — I took for love and not riches. He at one time was a clerk of Oxford, and had left school and lodged at home with my companion dwelling in our town. God have her soul. Her name was Allison. She knew my heart and also my secrets better than our parish priest, as I may prosper. To her I revealed all of my secrets; for had my husband pissed on a wall, or done a thing that should have cost him his life, to her, and to another worthy wife, and to my niece, which I loved well, I would have told his secrets, every day. And so I did very often. God knows it. That made his face very red and hot with true shame, and he blamed himself, for he had told me so great a secret.

And so it happened that once at Lent — many times went I to see my companion, because I loved to be gay, and to walk in March, April, and May from house to house to hear different tales — that Jenkin the clerk, and my companion, dame Allison, and I went into the fields. My husband was in London during that Lent; I had the opportunity to amuse myself, and to see, and to be seen by pleasure—loving people. How did I know where my good luck was destined to be or in what place? Therefore, I made my visits to vigils [at religious feasts], and processions, to preaching also, and to these pilgrimages, to miracle plays, and marriages, and wore my beautiful scarlet gowns. These worms, nor these moths, nor these insects, may I be damned otherwise, never gnawed at them, and do you know why? Because they were well used.

Now I will tell you of what happened to me. We walked in the fields until truly we had such a flirtation going, this clerk and I, that by my farsightedness I spoke to him and told him that if I was a widow, he should wed me. For certainly, I say not to boast, I was never yet without provision of marriage, nor of other things too. I have a mouse's heart not worth a leek, with one hole of which to escape, and if that fails, then everything is over. I maintained that he had enchanted me. My mother taught me that trick. And also I said I dreamed of him all night. He would have slain me as I laid on my back and my bed was full of real blood — “But yet I hope that you shall do me good, for blood symbolizes gold, as I was taught.” And all this is false; I didn't dream of any of it at all. But I followed as my mother's teachings, as well as other things also. But now, sir, — Let me see — what shall I say? A ha! By God I have my tale again! When that fourth husband was on the bier, I wept continually and put on a sorrowful expression —

⁵ Proverb: “And that the shoe before you looks new and elegant, yet no one but you know where it pinches.”

⁶ Beam supporting a cross.

⁷ Achaemenid king. His tomb is so elaborate it is studied as an artwork.

⁸ Appelles was an Achaemenid royal artist.

as wives must, for it is custom — and my headdress covered my vision. But considering that I was provided with a spouse, I wept but a little, and that I warrant.

My husband was carried to the church next morning, by neighbors that mourned for him, and Jenkin, our clerk, was one of them. So help me God, when I saw him go after the burial, I thought he had a pair of legs and feet so shapely and fair, that I gave my whole heart into his possession. He was, by truth, a twenty—year old, and I was forty, if I shall speak truth, but yet I always had youthful desires.

Gap—toothed I was, and that suited me well; I had the print of Saint Venus' seal. So help me God, I was a lively one, and fair, and rich, and young, and in good spirits. And truly, as my husbands told me, I had the best vagina there may be. For certain, I am a child of Venus in feeling, and my heart is dominated by Mars. Venus gave me my appetite for pleasure, my lasciviousness, and Mars gave me my rebellious boldness. My zodiac sign was Taurus and Mars therein — alas, alas, that love was ever a sin! I followed my natural disposition by virtue of my constellation. It made me so I could not withdraw my Chamber of Venus from a good fellow. Yet I have Mars' mark upon my face, and also in another secret place. For, God so wisely is my salvation, I never loved in moderation, but always followed my appetite. He could have been short, long, dark or white—haired. It didn't matter, as long as he liked me, how poor he was, or his social status.

What should I say, but at the month's end, this galliant clerk, Jenkin, who was so courteous, had wed me with great festivity, and to him I gave all the land and property that was ever given to me before. But afterward, I repented bitterly; He wouldn't tolerate any of my pleasures. By God, he hit me once on the ear, because I tore a page out of his book. The strike left me deaf. Stubborn I was, as is a lionesse, and I talked a lot, and would walk, as I had done before, from house to house, although he had sworn the contrary. For which often times he would preach and tell me about old Roman stories — how Simplicius Gallus left his wife and forsook her for the rest of his life, all because he saw her with her head uncovered, looking out the window upon a day.

Another Roman he told me by name, who, for his wife was at a midsummer festival without his knowledge, he forsook her also. And then would he search through his bible for the same proverb of Ecclesiastes, where he commanded and forbade fast, “Man shall not suffer his wife go gad about.” Then would he say this, without a doubt, “Whoever builds his house of willows, and spurs his blind horse over the fallow land, is worthy to be hanged on the gallows!” But all for not, — I set not a hawthorn berry of his proverbs, and of his old savings: I would not let him correct me. I hate him who tells me my vices and so do more of us, god knows, of us than I! This made him extremely angry with me; I would not put up with him under any circumstances.

Now will I tell you the truth, by Saint Thomas, why I ripped a page from his book, which caused him to hit me so hard I became deaf.

He had a book that gladly, night and day, he always read for enjoyment. He called it, “Valerie and Theofraste”⁹ — a book at which he always laughed whole—heartedly. And also there was sometimes a clerk at Rome, a cardinal, one Saint Jerome, that made a book against Jovinian, in which book also there was a Tertulan, Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowis, that was the abbess not far from Paris, and also the Parables of Salomon, Ovides Art, and many more.¹⁰ And all these were bound in one volume, and every night and day was his custom, when he had leisure time and vacation from other worldly duties, to read this book of the wicked wives. He knew more legends and lives of the wicked wives than of good wives

⁹ See Mann, p. 893.

¹⁰ Important people of their times who discriminated against women in their practices. See Mann, p. 894.

in the Bible. Trust me, it is impossible that any clerk would speak good of wives, except holy saints' lives, or any other woman at all. Who painted the lion, tell me who? By god, if woman had written stories, as clerks had within their oratories, they would have written more wickedly of men than all that Adam's gender may make amends for! The children of Mercury and Venus have been opposed to this behavior: Mercury loved wisdom and science, and Venus loved debauchery and expenditure. And as a result of their diverse disposition, each one loses influence in the sign of the zodiac where the other gains the most. And thus, God knows, Mercury is helpless in Pisces, where Venus is in the position of greatest influence, and Venus falls where Mercury is raised. Therefore, no woman of a clerk is praised. The clerk, when he is old and can't have sex worthy of his old shoe, then sits down and writes in his madness that woman can not keep their marriage!

But back to the story, why I told you all that I was beaten because of a book, by God! One night, Jenkin, our master of the house, read from his book, as he sat by the fire, of Eve first, and of her wickedness all of mankind was brought to misery, for which Jesus Christ himself was slain, who brought us with his heart—blood again. Look here, explicitly in women you may find that woman was the loss of mankind!

Then he read to me how Samson lost his hair: Sleeping, his mistress cut it with her sheers, and through treason he lost both of his eyes.

Then he read to me, that if I shall not lie, of Hercules and his Deianira, that caused him to set himself on fire.

He forgot nothing of the sorrow and woe that Socrates had with his two wives — how Xanthippe pissed on his head. This poor man sat still as if he were dead. He wiped his head; no more does he say, but “When the thunder ceases comes the rain!” — Of Pasiphae, that was the queen of Crete; for her maliciousness he thought the tale was sweet — fie, speak no more, it is a grotesque thing of her horrible lust and her pleasure. — Of Cliternystra, for her lechery that falsely caused her husband to die; he read it with great devotion.

He told me also when Amphiorax at Thebes lost his life; Eriphilem, for an ounce of gold, secretly told the Greeks where her husband was hiding, for which he had misfortune at Thebes.

Of Livia he told me, and of Lucye; they both made their husbands die, one for love and another for hate. Livia poisoned her husband one evening, for that she was his foe. Lucy, amorous, loved her husband so much that, because he should always think about her, she gave him a kind of love—drink that he was dead by the morning. And thus, continually husbands came to grief.

Then he told me how one Latumius complained to his fellow Arrius that in his garden grew a tree on which his three wives hanged themselves, for their recalcitrant spirit. “O dear brother,” said this Arrius, “Give me a plant of this blessed tree, and I will have it planted in my garden!”

He read of wives from more recent times, that some slayed their husbands in bed, and let her lover pleasure her all night, while the corpse lay on the floor upright. And some had driven nails in their brains while they slept, and thus they had slain them. Some put poison in their drinks. He spoke more harm than my heart could imagine; and therewithal he knew of more proverbs than grass or herbs in the world.

“Better that you dwell with a lion or a foul dragon, than a woman accustomed to scolding,” he said. “Better be high on the roof above than an angry wife down in the house. They have been so wicked and contrarious; they hate that their husbands love them.” He said, “A woman cast her shame away when she takes off her clothes,” and furthermore, “A fair woman, but she be chaste also, is like a gold ring in a wretch's nose.” Who would imagine, or who would suppose, the woe and distress in my heart?

And when I say he would never cease to read this cursed book all night, suddenly I had plucked three pages out of his book, right as he read it, and also I punched him in the cheek with my fist that he fell backward into our fire. And he shot up as a furious lion does, and with his fist he hit me on my head and I fell to the floor, as if I were dead. And when he saw how still I laid, he was aghast, and would have fled, had I not I recovered consciousness at last. “O, have you slain me false thief?” I said. “And you murdered me for my land? Before I am dead, yet I would kiss thee!”

And he came near and kneeled graciously down, and said, “Dear sister Alison, so help me God, I shall never hit thee again. I have only myself to blame for what I have done. Forgive me, I beseech you.” And yet, a second time I hit him on the cheek and said, “Thief, I am much avenged! Now I will die; I may no longer speak.” But in the end, with much sorrow and woe, we came to an agreement on our own. He gave me all the bridle in my hand, to have control of the house and land, and of his tongue and his hand also, and made him burn his book immediately right then. And when I had received by my skillfulness all the supremacy, he then said, “My own true wife, do as you please for the rest of your life. Keep your honor and my social status.” After that day we never fought again. So help me God, I was to him as kind as any wife from Denmark to India, and also true, and he was to me. I pray to God who sits in majesty, so bless his soul, for his dear mercy! Now will I say my tale, if you will hear it.

Behold the words between the Summoner and the Friar.

The Friar laughed when he heard all of this. “Now dame,” he said, “On my hope of joy or bliss, this is a long preamble to a tale!” And when the Summoner heard the Friar’s outcry, “Hey,” said the Summoner, “By God’s two arms, a friar will constantly interfere. Look, good men, a fly and also a friar will fall in every dish and every conversation! Why do you talk about preambling? What amble, or trot, or go at a walking—speed, or go sit down! You hinder our amusement in this manner.”

“Will you do the same, sir Summoner?” said the Friar. “Now, by my faith, I shall, when it’s my turn, tell such a tale or two of a summoner that all the folk in this place shall laugh!”

“Now otherwise, Friar, I curse your face,” said this Summoner. “And I curse myself, but if I tell tales two or three of friars, or I come to Sittingbourne, that I shall make your heart mourn, for well I know my patience is gone.”

Our host cried, “Stop that, right now!” and said, “Let the woman tell her tale. You’re all acting like you’re drunk on ale. Do, lady, tell your tale, and that is best.”

“All ready, sir,” she said. “Right as you wish, if I have the permission of this worthy Friar.”

“Yes, lady,” he said. “Tell it, and I will listen.”

Here ends the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and begins her Tale.

The Wife of Bath’s Tale

In the old days of King Arthur, of whom the Britons speak with great honor, all of the land was full of fairy creatures. The Elf Queen with her beautiful companions danced very often in many a green meadow. This was the old belief, as I read—I speak of many hundreds of years ago. But now man can no longer see the elves anymore, because of the great charity and prayers of licensed beggars and other holy friars. They search every land and every stream, as thick as specks of dust in the sunbeam, blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, bedrooms, cities, towns, castles, high towers, villages, barns, cattle—sheds, and

dairies. This makes it so that there have been no fairies. For where an elf used to walk, there now walks the licensed beggar himself.

At noontime and morning, he says his morning prayers and his holy prayers, as he goes on his begging rounds. Women may go safely up and down, for in every bush or under every tree, there is no other incubus¹¹ but he, and he will not do them any harm but dishonor.

And so it happened that this King Arthur had in his house a lively young knight who one day came riding from hawking. It happened that, alone as he was born, he saw a maiden walking before him, and from that maiden at once, in spite of all she could do, by great force he ravished her maidenhood. For which rape was such clamor and such demand for petition made unto King Arthur that this knight was sentenced to death, by course of law, and should have lost his head—perhaps such were the rules then—but the queen and other ladies so long prayed the king for mercy until he granted them the knight's life, and gave him to the queen, all at her will, to choose whether she would save him or put him to death.

The queen thanked the king with all her might, and after this, she spoke to the knight, when she saw her time, upon a day: "You are alive yet," she said, "in such a situation, though your life has no assurance. I will grant you your life if you can tell me what thing it is that women most desire. Be wary and keep your neck bone from the blade! And if you cannot tell it immediately, I will give you leave to go for twelve months and a day, to seek and learn a satisfactory answer in this matter. And I will have some security before you go, that you will deliver yourself in person in this place."

Woe was this knight, and sorrowfully he sighs; but what! He cannot do all as he pleases. And at last he chose to depart and come again, right at the year's end, with such an answer as God would provide him and he takes his leave and sets out.

He searches every house and every place where he hopes to have good fortune, to learn what things women love most, but he could not arrive in any region where he might find in this matter two creatures agreeing with each other. Some said women love riches best; some said honor, some said gallantry; some said finery, some said pleasure in bed, and often time to be widowed and wed. Some said that our hearts are most soothed when we have been flattered and pleased. (He gets very near to the truth; I will not lie! A man shall win us best with flattery; and with attention and with attentiveness, we are snared, every one of us.)

And some say that we love best to be free, and do right as it pleases us and that no man reprove us for our vices, but say that we are wise, and not foolish at all. For truly, there is not one of us all, if anyone rubs us on a sore spot, that we will not kick because he tells the truth. Try it, and he shall find it true; for, be we never so vicious within, we wish to be considered as wise and clean of sin.

And some say that we have great delight to be considered stable, and also discreet, and in one purpose steadfastly to dwell, and not disclose things that men tell us—but that tale is not worth a rake—handle! By God, we women can conceal nothing; Witness on Midas—do you want to hear?

Ovid, among other trivial things, said Midas had, under his long hair, growing upon his head, two ass's ears. The vice he hid with his best might, very cleverly from every man's sight, and that, save for his wife, nobody knew of it. He loved her the most, and trusted her also; he prayed her that to no creature she should tell of his disfigurement.

She swore to him, "Nay"; even to gain the whole world she would not do that wickedness or sin, to make her husband have so foul a reputation; she would not do it, for fear of her own shame. But nevertheless, she thought that she would die if she should hide a secret so long. She thought it swelled so

¹¹ A male demon that has sex with women who are often asleep.

painfully about her heart that necessarily some words would have to slip from her. And since she dared not tell it to any man, down to a marsh fast she ran—until she came there her heart was on fire—and as a bittern booms in the mire, she laid her mouth down unto the water. “Betray me not, water, with your sound!” she said, “To you, I tell it and nobody else: My husband has two long asses ears! Now my heart is healed; now it is out. I could no longer keep it, out of doubt.” Here you may see, though we a time wait, yet it must come out; we can hide no secret. The remnant of the tale, if you will hear, read Ovid, and there you may learn about it.

This knight, about whom my tale is in particular, when he saw that he might not discover it—this is to say, what women love most—within his breast very sorrowful was the spirit. But home he goes, he could not stay. The day came that homeward must he turn. And in his way, he chanced to ride, in all his sorrow, by a forest side, where he saw a dance go of ladies of four and twenty, and yet more. Toward that dance he went eagerly, in the hope that some wisdom he should learn. But certainly, before he came fully there, this dance was vanished but he did not know where. No creature he saw bore life, except that on the green he saw sitting a woman—a foul creature that no man could imagine. The old woman stood up to meet the knight and said, “Sir knight, in this direction lies no way out. Tell me what you seek, by your faith! Perhaps it may be the better. These old folk know many things,” she said.

“My dear mother,” said this knight, “certainly I am dead unless I can say what thing it is that women most desire. If you could give me guidance, I would repay you handsomely.”

“Pledge me your faith, here in my hand,” she said, “The next thing that I ask of you, you shall do it, if it lies in your power, and I will tell it to you before it is night.”

“You have my word!” said the knight, “I agree.”

“Then,” she said, “I dare boast your life is saved, for I will make it good. Upon my life, the queen will say as I. Let us see which is the proudest of them all who wears a head—cloth or a hairnet who dares contradict what I shall teach you. Let us go forth without longer speech.” Then she whispered a message in his ear and bid him to be glad and have no fear.

When they came to the court, this knight said he had kept his day, as he had promised, and his answer was ready, as he said. Very many a noble wife, and many a maid, and many a widow—for they are wise—and the queen herself, sitting as judge, assembled to hear his answer. And afterward, this knight was ordered to appear.

To every person silence was commanded, and that the knight should tell in front of the audience what thing it is that women love best. This knight did not stand silent as a beast, but to his questions, he answered immediately with a manly voice so that all the court heard it.

“My liege lady, without exception,” he said, “Women desire to have mastery as well over her husband as her lover, and to be in dominance over him. This is your greatest desire, though you kill me. Do as you wish; I am here at your will.”

In all of the court, there was no wife, nor maid, nor widow that denied what he said but said that he was worthy to have his life.

And with that word up jumped the old woman whom the knight saw sitting on the meadow.

“Mercy,” she said, “my sovereign lady queen. Before your court breaks up, do me justice. I taught this answer to the knight, for which he pledged me his truth there. The first thing that I would ask of him, he would do it, if it was within his might. Before the court then I pray to you, sir knight,” she said, “that you will take me as your wife, for you know well that I have saved your life. If I say false, say ‘nay,’ upon your faith.”

This knight answered, "Alas and woe is me! I know very well that such was my promise. For God's love, choose a new request! Take all my property, and let my body go."

"Nay, then," she said, "I curse us both! For though I am ugly and old and poor, I would not wish, for all the metal nor ore that is buried under earth or lies above, anything other than to be your wife and also your love."

"My love!" he said, "nay, my ruin! Alas, that any of my family should ever be so fully disgraced by a misalliance!" But all for nothing; this is the end, that he was constrained to; he must wed her out of necessity, and he takes his old wife and goes to bed.

Now some men would say, perhaps, that for my negligence I take no pains to tell you the joy and all the splendor that was at the wedding feast that day. To which I shall shortly answer: I say, there was no joy nor feast at all; there was nothing but gloom and much sorrow. For he wedded her in private the next morning, and all day after he hid like an owl; so woe was he—his wife looked so ugly.

Great was the woe the knight had in his thoughts when he was in bed with his wife; he thrashes about and turns to and fro. His old wife lay smiling all the time and said, "Oh dear husband, bless me! Is this how every knight acts with his wife? Is this the law of King Arthur's house? Is every knight of his this hard to please? I am your own love and also your wife; I am she who has saved your life certainly, and I have never done you wrong. Why do you behave like this with me this first night? You behave like a man who has lost his wit! What is my transgression? For God's love, tell it, and it shall be amended, if I can."

"Amended!" said this knight, "Alas, nay, nay! It will not be amended ever. You are so ugly, and so old also, and additionally descended from so low of a family, that little wonder it is that I toss and twist. Would to God that my heart would break!"

"Is this," she said, "the cause of your unrest?"

"Yes, certainly," he said, "it is not surprising."

"Now, sir," she said, "I could amend all this, if I wish, before three days, if you behave well towards me. But since you speak of such nobility as is descended out of old wealth, that therefore you should be noble men, such arrogance is not worth a hen. Look who is always the most virtuous, privately and in public, and always strives the most to do the noble deeds that he can, take him for the greatest noble man. Christ wishes for us to claim our nobility from him, not from our elders, from their old wealth. For though they gave us all their inheritance, for which we claim to be of high lineage, yet they cannot bequeath in any way to any of us their virtuous living. That made them be called noble men, and bid us to follow them in such condition.

"Well can the wise poet of Florence, who is called Dante, speak in this maxim—Lo, is such manner of rhyme is Dante's tale: "Very seldom rises up from his small branches excellence of man, for God, of his goodness, wants us from him to claim our nobility."¹² From our elders we can claim nothing but temporal things, which may hurt and destroy man.

"Also everyone knows this as well as I: If nobility were planted naturally unto a certain lineage down the line, privately and in public then would they never cease to carry out the excellent practice of nobility; they could do no shameful action or vice.

"Take fire, and bear it in the darkest hours between this and the mount of The Caucasus, and let men shut the doors and go then, yet will the fire finely blaze and burn as if twenty thousand men could behold it. It will still maintain its natural function, as I live until it dies.

¹² From Dante's *Purgatorio* VII, lines 121-3.

“Here may you truly see how nobility is not linked to wealth, since folk do not perform their function in all circumstances, as does the fire, lo, according to its nature. For, God knows it, men may well often find a lord’s son doing shame and villainy. And he who wants to be esteemed for his nobility because he was born of a noble house, and had his noble and virtuous elders, and is unwilling himself to do any noble deeds, nor follow his noble ancestors that are dead, he is not noble, be he a duke or an earl, for base sinful deeds make a churl. For nobility is nothing but renown of your ancestors, for their high virtue, which is an external thing to your person; your nobility comes from God alone. Then our true nobility comes from grace; it was in no way bequeathed to us with our rank.

“Think how noble, as says Valerius, was that Tullus Hostilius¹³, that out of poverty rose to high nobility. Read Seneca, and read also Boethius¹⁴, there shall you see explicitly, that it is no doubt that he is noble who does noble deeds. And therefore, dear husband, I conclude: although it was my ancestors who were uncultivated, yet may the high God—and so I hope—grant me grace to live virtuously. Then am I noble, when I begin to live virtuously and shun sin.

“And whereas you reproach me for poverty, the high God on whom we believe in voluntary poverty chose to live his life. And certainly, every man, maiden or wife may understand that Jesus, heavenly king, would not choose a vicious form of living. Glad poverty is an honorable thing, certainly: This will Seneca and other clerks say. Whoever considers himself satisfied with his poverty, I hold him rich, even if he did not have a shirt. He that covets is a poor person, for he would have that which is not in his power. But he that has nothing, nor covets anything, is rich, although you hold him as nothing but a commoner.

“True poverty, it sings characteristically, Juvenal says of poverty appositely: “The poor man, when he goes by the way, before the thieves he may sing and play.”¹⁵ Poverty is a hateful good, and, as I guess, a very great release from anxiety; a great increaser also of wisdom, to him that takes it in patience. Poverty is this, although it seems wretched: possession that no person will challenge. Poverty very often, when a man is low, makes him know God and himself. Poverty is a lens, I think, through which he may see his true friends. And therefore, sir, since I do you no harm, of my poverty you should reprove me no more.

“Now, sir, for old age you reprove me. And certainly, sir, though no written authority was in any book, you nobles of honor say that men should favor an old person, and call him father, for your nobility; and authors shall I find, as I guess.

“Now where you say that I am ugly and old then you should not dread of being a cuckold. For filth and old age, as I may prosper, are great guardians of chastity.

“But nonetheless, since I know your pleasure, I shall fulfill your worldly appetite. Choose now,” she said, “one of these two things: to have me ugly and old until I die, and to be a true and humble wife, and never displease you in all my life, or else you would have me young and fair, and accept the risk of the flocking of people that shall be at your house because of me, or in some other place, as it may well be. Now choose yourself, which of the two that you like.”

This knight reflects and sighs deeply, but at last, he said in this manner: my lady and my love, and wife so dear, I put myself in your wise control. Choose yourself that which may be most pleasant, and most honor to you and me. I do not care between either of the two, as what you like, it will satisfy me.”

¹³ Tullus Hostilius became the third king of Rome after coming from humble origins.

¹⁴ Both Seneca and Boethius wrote on nobility and how it comes from virtuous actions and our souls.

¹⁵ From Juvenal's *Satires* X.

“Then I have won mastery over you,” she said, “Since I may choose and govern as it pleases me?”

“Yes, certainly, wife,” he said, “I consider it best.”

“Kiss me,” she said, “we are no longer angry. For, by my truth, I will be to you both—that is to say, yes, both fair and good. I pray to God that I may die insane, unless I am as good and true to you as ever was wife, since that the world was new. And if I am not by tomorrow as fair to see as any lady, empress, or queen, that is between the east and also the west, do with my life and death as you please. Lift up the curtain; look at how it is.”

And when the knight truly saw all this, that she was so fair, and so young as well, for joy he took her in his two arms. His heart bathed in a bath of bliss; a thousand times in a row he gave her kisses, and she obeyed him in everything that might do him pleasure or liking.

And thus they live until their lives' end in perfect joy—and Jesus Christ send us husbands meek, young, and fresh in bed, and the grace to outlive them whom we wed. And also I pray Jesus to shorten the lives that will not be governed by their wives, and old and angry misers in expenditure, God send them soon the very plague!

Here ends the Wife of Bath's tale.