

[GROUP D]

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

'If there were no authority on earth
 Except experience, mine, for what it's worth,
 And that's enough for me, all goes to show
 That marriage is a misery and a woe;
 For let me say, if I may make so bold,
 My lords, since when I was but twelve years old,
 Thanks be to God Eternal evermore,
 Five husbands have I had at the church door;
 Yes, it's a fact that I have had so many,
 All worthy in their way, as good as any.

'Someone said recently for my persuasion
 That as Christ only went on one occasion
 To grace a wedding – in Cana of Galilee –
 He taught me by example there to see

That it is wrong to marry more than once.
 Consider, too, how sharply, for the nonce,
 He spoke, rebuking the Samaritan
 Beside the well, Christ Jesus, God and man.
 "Thou has had five men husband unto thee
 And he that even now thou hast," said He,
 "Is not thy husband." Such the words that fell;
 But what He meant thereby I cannot tell.
 Why was her fifth – explain it if you can
 No lawful spouse to the Samaritan?
 How many might have had her, then, to wife?
 I've never heard an answer all my life
 To give the number final definition.
 People may guess or frame a supposition,
 But I can say for certain, it's no lie,
 God bade us all to wax and multiply.
 That kindly text I well can understand.
 Is not my husband under God's command
 To leave his father and mother and take me?
 No word of what the number was to be,
 Then why not marry two or even eight?
 And why speak evil of the married state?
 'Take wise King Solomon of long ago;
 We hear he had a thousand wives or so.
 And would to God it were allowed to me
 To be refreshed, aye, half so much as he!
 He must have had a gift of God for wives,
 No one to match him in a world of lives!
 This noble king, one may as well admit,
 On the first night threw many a merry fit
 With each of them, he was so much alive.
 Blessed be God that I have wedded five!
 Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears.
 I can't keep continent for years and years.
 No sooner than one husband's dead and gone
 Some other Christian man shall take me on,
 For then, so says the Apostle, I am free
 To wed, o' God's name, where it pleases me.

Wedding's no sin, so far as I can learn.
Better it is to marry than to burn.

'What do I care if people choose to see
Scandal in Lamech for his bigamy?
I know that Abraham was a holy man
And Jacob too – I speak as best I can –
Yet each of them, we know, had several brides,
Like many another holy man besides.
Show me a time or text where God disparages
Or sets a prohibition upon marriages
Expressly, let me have it! Show it me!
And where did He command virginity?
I know as well as you do, never doubt it,
All the Apostle Paul has said about it;
He said that as for precepts he had none.
One may advise a woman to be one;
Advice is no commandment in my view.
He left it in our judgement what to do.

'Had God commanded maidenhood to all
Marriage would be condemned beyond recall,
And certainly if seed were never sown,
How ever could virginity be grown?
Paul did not dare pronounce, let matters rest,
His Master having given him no behest.
There's a prize offered for virginity;
Catch as catch can! Who's in for it? Let's see!

'It is not everyone who hears the call;
On whom God wills He lets His power fall.
The Apostle was a virgin, well I know;
Nevertheless, though all his writings show
He wished that everyone were such as he,
It's all mere counsel to virginity.
And as for being married, he lets me do it
Out of indulgence, so there's nothing to it
In marrying me, suppose my husband dead;
There's nothing bigamous in such a bed.
Though it were good a man should never touch
A woman (meaning here in bed and such)

And dangerous to assemble fire and tow
– What this allusion means you all must know –
He only says virginity is fresh,
More perfect than the frailty of the flesh
In married life – except when he and she
Prefer to live in married chastity.

'I grant it you. I'll never say a word
Decrying maidenhood although preferred
To frequent marriage; there are those who mean
To live in their virginity, as clean
In body as in soul, and never mate.
I'll make no boast about my own estate.
As in a noble household, we are told,
Not every dish and vessel's made of gold,
Some are of wood, yet earn their master's praise,
God calls His folk to Him in many ways.
To each of them God gave His proper gift,
Some this, some that, and left them to make shift.
Virginity is indeed a great perfection,
And married continence, for God's dilection,
But Christ, who of perfection is the well,
Bade not that everyone should go and sell
All that he had and give it to the poor
To follow in His footsteps, that is sure.
He spoke to those that would live perfectly,
And by your leave, my lords, that's not for me.
I will bestow the flower of life, the honey,
Upon the acts and fruit of matrimony.

'Tell me to what conclusion or in aid
Of what were generative organs made?
And for what profit were those creatures wrought?
Trust me, they cannot have been made for naught.
Gloze as you will and plead the explanation
That they were only made for the purgation
Of urine, little things of no avail
Except to know a female from a male,
And nothing else. Did somebody say no?
Experience knows well it isn't so.

The learned may rebuke me, or be loth
 To think it so, but they were made for both,
 That is to say both use and pleasure in
 Engendering, except in case of sin.
 Why else the proverb written down and set
 In books: "A man must yield his wife her debt"?
 What means of paying her can he invent
 Unless he use his silly instrument?
 It follows they were fashioned at creation
 Both to purge urine and for propagation.

'But I'm not saying everyone is bound
 Who has such harness as you heard me expound
 To go and use it breeding; that would be
 To show too little care for chastity.
 Christ was a virgin, fashioned as a man,
 And many of his saints since time began
 Were ever perfect in their chastity.
 I'll have no quarrel with virginity.
 Let them be pure wheat loaves of maidenhead
 And let us wives be known for barley-bread;
 Yet Mark can tell that barley-bread sufficed
 To freshen many at the hand of Christ.
 In that estate to which God summoned me
 I'll persevere; I'm not pernickety.
 In wifehood I will use my instrument
 As freely as my Maker me it sent.
 If I turn difficult, God give me sorrow!
 My husband, he shall have it eve and morrow
 Whenever he likes to come and pay his debt,
 I won't prevent him! I'll have a husband yet
 Who shall be both my debtor and my slave
 And bear his tribulation to the grave
 Upon his flesh, as long as I'm his wife.
 For mine shall be the power all his life
 Over his proper body, and not he,
 Thus the Apostle Paul has told it me,
 And bade our husbands they should love us well;
 There's a command on which I like to dwell . . .'

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon
 'Madam,' he said, 'by God and by St John,
 That's noble preaching no one could surpass!
 I was about to take a wife; alas!
 Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?
 There'll be no marrying for me this year!'

'You wait,' she said, 'my story's not begun.
 You'll taste another brew before I've done;
 You'll find it doesn't taste as good as ale;
 And when I've finished telling you my tale
 Of tribulation in the married life
 In which I've been an expert as a wife,
 That is to say, myself have been the whip.
 So please yourself whether you want to sip
 At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.
 Be cautious before making the approach,
 For I'll give instances, and more than ten.
 And those who won't be warned by other men,
 By other men shall suffer their correction,
 So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.*
 You read his *Almagest*; you'll find it there.'

'Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,'
 The Pardoner said, 'go on as you began!
 Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.
 Instruct us younger men in your technique.'
 'Gladly,' she said, 'if you will let me speak,
 But still I hope the company won't reprove me.
 Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,
 And please don't be offended at my views;
 They're really only offered to amuse.'

'Now, gentlemen, I'll on and tell my tale
 And as I hope to drink good wine and ale
 I'll tell the truth. Those husbands that I had,
 Three of them were good and two were bad.
 The three that I call "good" were rich and old.
 They could indeed with difficulty hold
 The articles that bound them all to me;
 (No doubt you understand my simile).

So help me God, I have to laugh outright
 Remembering how I made them work at night!
 And faith I set no store by it; no pleasure
 It was to me. They'd given me their treasure,
 And so I had no need of diligence
 Winning their love, or showing reverence.
 They loved me well enough, so, heavens above,
 Why should I make a dainty of their love?

'A knowing woman's work is never done
 To get a lover if she hasn't one,
 But as I had them eating from my hand
 And as they'd yielded me their gold and land,
 Why then take trouble to provide them pleasure
 Unless to profit and amuse my leisure?
 I set them so to work, I'm bound to say;
 Many a night they sang, "Alack the day!"
 Never for them the flitch of bacon though
 That some have won in Essex at Dunmow!*

I managed them so well by my technique
 Each was delighted to go out and seek
 And buy some pretty thing for me to wear,
 Happy if I as much as spoke them fair.
 God knows how spitefully I used to scold them.

'Listen, I'll tell you how I used to hold them,
 You knowing women, who can understand,
 First put them in the wrong, and out of hand.
 No one can be so bold – I mean no man –
 At lies and swearing as a woman can.
 This is no news, as you'll have realized,
 To knowing ones, but to the misadvised.
 A knowing wife if she is worth her salt
 Can always prove her husband is at fault,
 And even though the fellow may have heard
 Some story told him by a little bird
 She knows enough to prove the bird is crazy
 And get her maid to witness she's a daisy,
 With full agreement, scarce solicited.
 But listen. Here's the sort of thing I said:

"Now, sir old dotard, what is that you say?
 Why is my neighbour's wife so smart and gay?
 She is respected everywhere she goes.
 I sit at home and have no decent clothes.
 Why haunt her house? What are you doing there?
 Are you so amorous? Is she so fair?
 What, whispering secrets to our maid? For shame,
 Sir ancient lecher! Time you dropped that game.
 And if I see my gossip or a friend
 You scold me like a devil! There's no end
 If I as much as stroll towards his house.
 Then you come home as drunken as a mouse,
 You mount your throne and preach, chapter and verse
 – All nonsense – and you tell me it's a curse
 To marry a poor woman – she's expensive;
 Or if her family's wealthy and extensive
 You say it's torture to endure her pride
 And melancholy airs, and more beside.
 And if she has a pretty face, old traitor,
 You say she's game for any fornicator
 And ask what likelihood will keep her straight
 With all those men who lie about in wait.

"You say that some desire us for our wealth,
 Some for our shapeliness, our looks, our health,
 Some for our singing, others for our dancing,
 Some for our gentleness and dalliant glancing,
 And some because our hands are soft and small;
 By your account the devil gets us all.

"You say what castle wall can be so strong
 As to hold out against a siege for long?
 And if her looks are foul you say that she
 Is hot for every man that she can see,
 Leaping upon them with a spaniel's airs
 Until she finds a man to buy her wares.
 Never was goose upon the lake so grey
 But that she found a gander, so you say.
 You say it's hard to keep a girl controlled
 If she's the kind that no one wants to hold.

That's what you say as you stump off to bed,
 You brute! You say no man of sense would wed,
 That is, not if he wants to go to Heaven.
 Wild thunderbolts and fire from the Seven
 Planets descend and break your withered neck!

"You say that buildings falling into wreck,
 And smoke, and scolding women, are the three
 Things that will drive a man from home. Dear me!
 What ails the poor old man to grumble so?

"We women hide our faults but let them show
 Once we are safely married, so you say.
 There's a fine proverb for a popinjay!

"You say that oxen, asses, hounds and horses
 Can be tried out on various ploys and courses;
 And basins too, and dishes when you buy them,
 Spoons, chairs and furnishings, a man can try them
 As he can try a suit of clothes, no doubt,
 But no one ever tries a woman out
 Until he's married her; old dotard crow!
 And then you say she lets her vices show.

"You also say we count it for a crime
 Unless you praise our beauty all the time,
 Unless you're always poring on our faces
 And call us pretty names in public places;
 Or if you fail to treat me to a feast
 Upon my birthday — presents at the least —
 Or to respect my nurse and her grey hairs,
 Or be polite to all my maids upstairs
 And to my father's cronies and his spies.
 That's what you say, old barrellful of lies!

"Then there's our young apprentice, handsome Johnny,
 Because he has crisp hair that shines as bonny
 As finest gold, and squires me up and down
 You show your low suspicions in a frown.
 I wouldn't have him, not if you died to-morrow!

"And tell me this, God punish you with sorrow,
 Why do you hide the keys of coffer doors?
 It's just as much my property as yours.

Do you want to make an idiot of your wife?
 Now, by the Lord that gave me soul and life,
 You shan't have both, you can't be such a noddie
 As think to keep my goods and have my body!
 One you must do without, whatever you say.
 And do you need to spy on me all day?
 I think you'd like to lock me in your coffer!
 'Go where you please, dear wife,' you ought to offer,
 'Amuse yourself! I shan't give ear to malice,
 I know you for a virtuous wife, Dame Alice.'
 We cannot love a husband who takes charge
 Of where we go. We like to be at large.

"Above all other men may God confer
 His blessing on that wise astrologer
 Sir Ptolemy who, in his *Almagest*,
 Has set this proverb down: 'Of men, the best
 And wisest care not who may have in hand
 The conduct of the world.' I understand
 That means, 'If you've enough, you shouldn't care
 How prosperously other people fare.'
 Be sure, old dotard, if you call the bluff,
 You'll get your evening rations right enough.
 He's a mean fellow that lets no man handle
 His lantern when it's just to light a candle
 He has lost no light, he hasn't felt the strain;
 And you have light enough, so why complain?

"And when a woman tries a mild display
 In dress or costly ornament, you say
 It is a danger to her chastity,
 And then, bad luck to you, start making free
 With Bible tags in the Apostle's name;
 'And in like manner, chastely and with shame,
 You women should adorn yourselves,' said he,
 'And not with braided hair or jewelry,
 With pearl or golden ornament.' What next!
 I'll pay as much attention to your text
 And rubric in such things as would a gnat.

"And once you said that I was like a cat,

For if you singe a cat it will not roam
 And that's the way to keep a cat at home.
 But when she feels her fur is sleek and gay
 She can't be kept indoors for half a day
 But off she takes herself as dusk is falling
 To show her fur and go a-caterwauling.
 Which means if I feel gay, as you suppose,
 I shall run out to show my poor old clothes.

"Silly old fool! You and your private spies!
 Go on, beg Argus with his hundred eyes
 To be my bodyguard, that's better still!
 But yet he shan't, I say, against my will.
 I'll pull him by the beard, believe you me!

"And once you said that principally three*
 Misfortunes trouble earth, east, west and north,
 And no man living could endure a fourth.
 My dear sir shrew, Jesu cut short your life!
 You preach away and say a hateful wife
 Is reckoned to be one of these misfortunes.
 Is there no other trouble that importunes
 The world and that your parables could condemn?
 Must an unhappy wife be one of them?

"Then you compared a woman's love to Hell,
 To barren land where water will not dwell,
 And you compared it to a quenchless fire,
 The more it burns the more is its desire
 To burn up everything that burnt can be.
 You say that just as worms destroy a tree
 A wife destroys her husband and contrives,
 As husbands know, the ruin of their lives."

"Such was the way, my lords, you understand
 I kept my older husbands well in hand.
 I told them they were drunk and their unfitness
 To judge my conduct forced me to take witness
 That they were lying. Johnny and my niece
 Would back me up. O Lord, I wrecked their peace,
 Innocent as they were, without remorse!
 For I could bite and whinney like a horse

And launch complaints when things were all my fault;
 I'd have been lost if I had called a halt.
 First to the mill is first to grind your corn;
 I attacked first and they were overborne,
 Glad to apologize and even suing
 Pardon for what they'd never thought of doing.

'T'd tackle one for wenching, out of hand,
 Although so ill the man could hardly stand,
 Yet he felt flattered in his heart because
 He thought it showed how fond of him I was.
 I swore that all my walking out at night
 Was just to keep his wenching well in sight.
 That was a dodge that made me shake with mirth;
 But all such wit is given us at birth.
 Lies, tears and spinning are the things God gives
 By nature to a woman, while she lives.
 So there's one thing at least that I can boast,
 That in the end I always ruled the roast;
 Cunning or force was sure to make them stumble,
 And always keeping up a steady grumble.

'But bed-time above all was their misfortune;
 That was the place to scold them and importune
 And baulk their fun. I never would abide
 In bed with them if hands began to slide
 Till they had promised ransom, paid a fee:
 And then I let them do their nicety.
 And so I tell this tale to every man,
 "It's all for sale and let him win who can."
 No empty-handed man can lure a bird.
 His pleasures were my profit; I concurred,
 Even assumed fictitious appetite,
 Though bacon never gave me much delight.
 And that's the very fact that made me chide them.
 And had the Pope been sitting there beside them
 I wouldn't have spared them at their very table,
 But paid them out as far as I was able.
 I say, so help me God Omnipotent,
 Were I to make my will and testament

I owe them nothing, paid them word for word
 Putting my wits to use, and they preferred
 To give it up and take it for the best
 For otherwise they would have got no rest.
 Though they might glower like a maddened beast
 They got no satisfaction, not the least.

'I then would say, "My dear, just take a peep!
 What a meek look on Willikin our sheep!
 Come nearer, husband, let me kiss your cheek;
 You should be just as patient, just as meek;
 Sweeten your heart. Your conscience needs a probe.
 You're fond of preaching patience out of Job,
 And so be patient; practise what you preach,
 And if you don't, my dear, we'll have to teach
 You that it's nice to have a quiet life.
 One of us must be master, man or wife,
 And since a man's more reasonable, he
 Should be the patient one, you must agree.

"What ails you, man, to grumble so and groan?
 Just that you want my what-not all your own?
 Why, take it all, man, take it, every bit!
 St Peter, what a love you have for it!
 For if I were to sell my *belle chose*,
 I could go walking fresher than a rose;
 But I will keep it for your private tooth.
 By God, you are to blame, and that's the truth."

'That's how my first three husbands were undone.
 Now let me tell you of my last but one.

'He was a reveller, was number four;
 That is to say he kept a paramour.
 Young, strong and stubborn, I was full of rage
 And jolly as a magpie in a cage.
 Play me the harp and I would dance and sing,
 Believe me, like a nightingale in spring,
 If I had had a draught of sweetened wine.

'Metellius, that filthy lout – the swine
 Who snatched a staff and took his woman's life
 For drinking wine – if I had been his wife

He never would have daunted me from drink.
 Whenever I take wine I have to think
 Of Venus, for as cold engenders hail
 A lecherous mouth begets a lecherous tail.
 A woman in her cups has no defence,
 As lechers know from long experience.

'But Christ! Whenever it comes back to me,
 When I recall my youth and jollity,
 It fairly warms the cockles of my heart!
 This very day I feel a pleasure start,
 Yes, I can feel it tickling at the root.
 Lord, how it does me good! I've had my fruit,
 I've had my world and time, I've had my fling!
 But age that comes to poison everything
 Has taken all my beauty and my pith.
 Well, let it go, the devil go therewith!
 The flour is gone, there is no more to say,
 And I must sell the bran as best I may;
 But still I mean to find my way to fun. . . .
 Now let me tell you of my last but one.

'I told you how it filled my heart with spite
 To see another woman his delight,
 By God and all His saints I made it good!
 I carved him out a cross of the same wood,
 Not with my body in a filthy way,
 But certainly by seeming rather gay
 To others, frying him in his own grease
 Of jealousy and rage; he got no peace.
 By God on earth I was his purgatory,
 For which I hope his soul may be in glory.
 God knows he sang a sorry tune, he flinched,
 And bitterly enough, when the shoe pinched.
 And God and he alone can say how grim,
 How many were the ways I tortured him.

'He died when I came back from Jordan Stream
 And he lies buried under the rood-beam,
 Albeit that his tomb can scarce supply us
 With such a show as that of King Darius

— Apelles sculpted it in a sumptuous taste —
 Expensive funerals are just a waste.
 Farewell to him, God give his spirit rest!
 He's in his grave, he's nailed up in his chest.

'Now of my fifth, last husband let me tell.
 God never let his soul be sent to Hell!
 And yet he was my worst, and many a blow
 He struck me still can ache along my row
 Of ribs, and will until my dying day.

'But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
 So coaxing, so persuasive. . . . Heaven knows
 Whenever he wanted it — my *belle chose* —
 Though he had beaten me in every bone
 He still could wheedle me to love, I own.
 I think I loved him best, I'll tell no lie.
 He was disdainful in his love, that's why.
 We women have a curious fantasy
 In such affairs, or so it seems to me.
 When something's difficult, or can't be had,
 We crave and cry for it all day like mad.
 Forbid a thing, we pine for it all night,
 Press fast upon us and we take to flight;
 We use disdain in offering our wares.
 A throng of buyers sends prices up at fairs,
 Cheap goods have little value, they suppose;
 And that's a thing that every woman knows.

'My fifth and last — God keep his soul in health!
 The one I took for love and not for wealth,
 Had been at Oxford not so long before
 But had left school and gone to lodge next door,
 Yes, it was to my godmother's he'd gone.
 God bless her soul! *Her* name was Alison.
 She knew my heart and more of what I thought
 Than did the parish priest, and so she ought!
 She was my confidante, I told her all.
 For had my husband pissed against a wall
 Or done some crime that would have cost his life,
 To her and to another worthy wife

And to my niece, because I loved her well,
 I'd have told everything there was to tell.
 And so I often did, and Heaven knows
 It used to set him blushing like a rose
 For shame, and he would blame his lack of sense
 In telling me secrets of such consequence.

'And so one time it happened that in Lent,
 As I so often did, I rose and went
 To see her, ever wanting to be gay
 And go a-strolling, March, April and May,
 From house to house for chat and village malice.

'Johnny (the boy from Oxford) and Dame Alice
 And I myself, into the fields we went.
 My husband was in London all that Lent;
 All the more fun for me — I only mean
 The fun of seeing people and being seen
 By cocky lads; for how was I to know
 Where or what graces Fortune might bestow?
 And so I made a round of visitations,
 Went to processions, festivals, orations,
 Preachments and pilgrimages, watched the carriages
 They use for plays and pageants, went to marriages,
 And always wore my gayest scarlet dress.

'These worms, these moths, these mites, I must confess,
 Got little chance to eat it, by the way.
 Why not? Because I wore it every day.

'Now let me tell you all that came to pass.
 We sauntered in the meadows through the grass
 Toying and dallying to such extent,
 Johnny and I, that I grew provident
 And I suggested, were I ever free
 And made a widow, he should marry me.
 And certainly — I do not mean to boast —
 I ever was more provident than most
 In marriage matters and in other such.
 I never think a mouse is up to much
 That only has one hole in all the house;
 If that should fail, well, it's good-bye the mouse.

'I let him think I was as one enchanted
(That was a trick my godmother implanted)
And told him I had dreamt the night away
Thinking of him, and dreamt that as I lay
He tried to kill me. Blood had drenched the bed.

"But still it was a lucky dream," I said,
"For blood betokens gold as I recall."

It was a lie. I hadn't dreamt at all.

'Twas from my godmother I learnt my lore
In matters such as that, and many more.

'Well, let me see . . . what had I to explain?
Aha! By God, I've got the thread again.

'When my fourth husband lay upon his bier
I wept all day and looked as drear as drear,
As widows must, for it is quite in place,
And with a handkerchief I hid my face.
Now that I felt provided with a mate
I wept but little, I need hardly state.

'To church they bore my husband on the morrow
With all the neighbours round him venting sorrow,
And one of them of course was handsome Johnny.
So help me God, I thought he looked so bonny
Behind the coffin! Heavens, what a pair
Of legs he had! Such feet, so clean and fair!
I gave my whole heart up, for him to hold.
He was, I think, some twenty winters old,
And I was forty then, to tell the truth.
But still, I always had a coltish tooth.
Yes, I'm gap-toothed; it suits me well I feel,
It is the print of Venus and her seal.
So help me God I was a lusty one,
Fair, young and well-to-do, and full of fun!
And truly, as my husbands said to me
I had the finest *quoniam* that might be.
For Venus sent me feeling from the stars
And my heart's boldness came to me from Mars.
Venus gave me desire and lecherousness
And Mars my hardihood, or so I guess,

Born under Taurus and with Mars therein.
Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
I ever followed natural inclination
Under the power of my constellation
And was unable to deny, in truth,
My chamber of Venus to a likely youth.
The mark of Mars is still upon my face
And also in another privy place.
For as I may be saved by God above,
I never used discretion when in love
But ever followed on my appetite,
Whether the lad was short, long, black or white.
Little I cared, if he was fond of me,
How poor he was, or what his rank might be.

'What shall I say? Before the month was gone
This gay young student, my delightful John,
Had married me in solemn festival.
I handed him the money, lands and all
That ever had been given me before;
This I repented later, more and more.
None of my pleasures would he let me seek.
By God, he smote me once upon the cheek
Because I tore a page out of his book,
And that's the reason why I'm deaf. But look,
Stubborn I was, just like a lioness;
As to my tongue, a very wrangleress.
I went off gadding as I had before
From house to house, however much he swore.
Because of that he used to preach and scold,
Drag Roman history up from days of old,
How one Simplicius Gallus left his wife,
Deserting her completely all his life,
Only for poking out her head one day
Without a hat, upon the public way.

'Some other Roman - I forget his name -
Because his wife went to a summer's game
Without his knowledge, left her in the lurch.
'And he would take the Bible up and search

For proverbs in Ecclesiasticus,
 Particularly one that has it thus:
 "Suffer no wicked woman to gad about."
 And then would come the saying (need you doubt?)

*A man who seeks to build his house of fallows,
 A man who spurs a blind horse over fallows,
 Or lets his wife make pilgrimage to Hallows,
 Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.*

But all for naught. I didn't give a hen
 For all his proverbs and his wise old men.
 Nor would I take rebuke at any price;
 I hate a man who points me out my vice,
 And so, God knows, do many more than I.
 That drove him raging mad, you may rely.
 Nor more would I forbear him, I can promise.

'Now let me tell you truly by St Thomas
 About that book and why I tore the page
 And how he smote me deaf in very rage.

'He had a book, he kept it on his shelf,
 And night and day he read it to himself
 And laughed aloud, although it was quite serious.
 He called it *Theophrastus and Valerius*.^{*}
 There was another Roman, much the same,
 A cardinal; St Jerome was his name.
 He wrote a book against Jovinian,
 Bound up together with Tertullian,
 Chrysippus, Trotula and Heloise,
 An abbess, lived near Paris. And with these
 Were bound the parables of Solomon,
 With Ovid's *Art of Love* another one.
 All these were bound together in one book
 And day and night he used to take a look
 At what it said, when he had time and leisure
 Or had no occupation but his pleasure,
 Which was to read this book of wicked wives;
 He knew more legends of them and their lives
 Than there are good ones mentioned in the Bible.
 For take my word for it, there is no libel.

On women that the clergy will not paint,
 Except when writing of a woman-saint,
 But never good of other women, though.
 Who called the lion savage? Do you know?
 By God, if women had but written stories
 Like those the clergy keep in oratories,
 More had been written of man's wickedness
 Than all the sons of Adam could redress.
 Children of Mercury^{*} and we of Venus
 Keep up the contrariety between us;
 Mercury stands for wisdom, thrift and science,
 Venus for revel, squandering and defiance.
 Their several natures govern their direction;
 One rises when the other's in dejection.
 So Mercury is desolate when halted
 In Pisces, just where Venus is exalted,
 And Venus falls where Mercury is raised,
 And women therefore never can be praised
 By learned men, old scribes who cannot do
 The works of Venus more than my old shoe.
 These in their dotage sit them down to frowse
 And say that women break their marriage-vows!

'Now to my purpose as I told you; look,
 Here's how I got a beating for a book.
 One evening Johnny, glowering with ire,
 Sat with his book and read it by the fire.
 And first he read of Eve whose wickedness
 Brought all mankind to sorrow and distress,
 Root-cause why Jesus Christ Himself was slain
 And gave His blood to buy us back again.
 Aye, there's the text where you expressly find
 That woman brought the loss of all mankind.

'He read me then how Samson as he slept
 Was shorn of all his hair by her he kept,
 And by that treachery Samson lost his eyes.
 And then he read me, if I tell no lies,
 All about Hercules and Deianire;
 She tricked him into setting himself on fire.

'He left out nothing of the miseries
Occasioned by his wives to Socrates.
Xantippe poured a piss-pot on his head.
The silly man sat still, as he were dead,
Wiping his head, but dared no more complain
Than say, "Ere thunder stops, down comes the rain."

'Next of Pasiphaë the Queen of Crete ;*
For wickedness he thought that story sweet;
Fie, say no more! It has a grisly sting,
Her horrible lust. How could she do the thing!

'And then he told of Clytemnestra's lechery
And how she made her husband die by treachery.
He read that story with a great devotion.

'He read me what occasioned the commotion
By which Amphiaraus lost his life;
My husband had a legend about his wife
Eriphyle, who for a gaud in gold
Went to the Greeks in secret, and she told
Them where to find him, in what hiding-place.
At Thebes it was he met with sorry grace.

'Of Livia and Lucilia then he read,
And both of course had killed their husbands dead,
The one for love, the other out of hate.
Livia prepared some poison for him late
One evening and she killed him out of spite,
Lucilia out of lecherous delight.
For she, in order he might only think
Of her, prepared an aphrodisiac drink;
He drank it and was dead before the morning.
Such is the fate of husbands; it's a warning.

'And then he told how one Latumius
Lamented to his comrade Arrius
That in his orchard-plot there grew a tree
On which his wives had hanged themselves, all three,
Or so he said, out of some spite or other;
To which this Arrius replied, "Dear brother,
Give me a cutting from that blessed tree
And planted in my garden it shall be!"

'Of wives of later date he also read,
How some had killed their husbands when in bed,
Then night-long with their lechers played the whore,
While the poor corpse lay fresh upon the floor.

'One drove a nail into her husband's brain
While he was sleeping, and the man was slain;
Others put poison in their husbands' drink.
He spoke more harm of us than heart can think
And knew more proverbs too, for what they're worth,
Than there are blades of grass upon the earth.

"Better," says he, "to share your habitation
With lion, dragon, or abomination
Than with a woman given to reproof.
Better," says he, "take refuge on the roof
Than with an angry wife, down in the house;
They are so wicked and cantankerous
They hate the things their husbands like," he'd say.
"A woman always casts her shame away
When she casts off her smock, and that's in haste.
A pretty woman, if she isn't chaste,
Is like a golden ring in a sow's snout."

'Who could imagine, who could figure out
The torture in my heart? It reached the top
And when I saw that he would never stop
Reading this cursed book, all night no doubt,
I suddenly grabbed and tore three pages out
Where he was reading, at the very place,
And fisted such a buffet in his face
That backwards down into our fire he fell.

'Then like a maddened lion, with a yell
He started up and smote me on the head,
And down I fell upon the floor for dead.

'And when he saw how motionless I lay
He was aghast and would have fled away,
But in the end I started to come to.
"O have you murdered me, you robber, you,
To get my land?" I said. "Was that the game?
Before I'm dead I'll kiss you all the same."

'He came up close and kneeling gently down
 He said, "My love, my dearest Alison,
 So help me God, I never again will hit
 You, love; and if I did, you asked for it.
 Forgive me!" But for all he was so meek,
 I up at once and smote him on the cheek
 And said, "Take that to level up the score!
 Now let me die, I can't speak any more."

'We had a mort of trouble and heavy weather
 But in the end we made it up together.
 He gave the bridle over to my hand,
 Gave me the government of house and land,
 Of tongue and fist, indeed of all he'd got.
 I made him burn that book upon the spot.
 And when I'd mastered him, and out of deadlock
 Secured myself the sovereignty in wedlock,
 And when he said, "My own and truest wife,
 Do as you please for all the rest of life,
 But guard your honour and my good estate,"
 From that day forward there was no debate.
 So help me God I was as kind to him
 As any wife from Denmark to the rim
 Of India, and as true. And he to me.
 And I pray God that sits in majesty
 To bless his soul and fill it with his glory.
 Now, if you'll listen, I will tell my story.'

Words between the Summoner and the Friar

The Friar laughed when he had heard all this.
 'Well, Ma'am,' he said, 'as God may send me bliss,
 This is a long preamble to a tale!
 But when the Summoner heard the Friar rail,
 'Just look!' he cried, 'by the two arms of God!
 These meddling friars are always on the prod!
 Don't we all know a friar and a fly.
 Go prod and buzz in every dish and pie!

What do you mean with your "preamble"?
 Amble yourself, trot, do a meditation!
 You're spoiling all our fun with your commotion.'
 The Friar smiled and said, 'Is that your motion?
 I promise on my word before I go
 To find occasion for a tale or so
 About a summoner that will make us laugh.'
 'Well, damn your eyes, and on my own behalf,'
 The Summoner answered, 'mine be damned as well
 If I can't think of several tales to tell
 About the friars that will make you mourn
 Before we get as far as Sittingbourne.
 Have you no patience? Look, he's in a huff!
 Our Host called out, 'Be quiet, that's enough!
 Shut up, and let the woman tell her tale.
 You must be drunk, you've taken too much ale.
 Now, Ma'am, you go ahead and no demur.'
 'All right,' she said, 'it's just as you prefer,
 If I have licence from this worthy friar.'
 'Nothing,' said he, 'that I should more desire.'

The Wife of Bath's Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days
 (A king that every Briton loves to praise)
 This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.
 The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke
 Their elfin dance on many a green mead,
 Or so was the opinion once, I read,
 Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.
 But no one now sees fairies any more.
 For now the saintly charity and prayer
 Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;
 They search the countryside through field and stream
 As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,
 Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
 Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,

Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,
 And that's the reason why there are no fairies.
 Wherever there was wont to walk an elf
 To-day there walks the holy friar himself
 As evening falls or when the daylight springs,
 Saying his mattins and his holy things,
 Walking his limit round from town to town.
 Women can now go safely up and down
 By every bush or under every tree;
 There is no other incubus but he,
 So there is really no one else to hurt you
 And he will do no more than take your virtue.

Now it so happened, I began to say,
 Long, long ago in good King Arthur's day,
 There was a knight who was a lusty liver.
 One day as he came riding from the river
 He saw a maiden walking all forlorn
 Ahead of him, alone as she was born.
 And of that maiden, spite of all she said,
 By very force he took her maidenhead.

This act of violence made such a stir,
 So much petitioning to the king for her,
 That he condemned the knight to lose his head
 By course of law. He was as good as dead
 (It seems that then the statutes took that view)
 But that the queen, and other ladies too,
 Implored the king to exercise his grace
 So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case
 And granted her his life, and she could choose
 Whether to show him mercy or refuse.

The queen returned him thanks with all her might,
 And then she sent a summons to the knight
 At her convenience, and expressed her will:
 'You stand, for such is the position still,
 In no way certain of your life,' said she,
 'Yet you shall live if you can answer me:
 What is the thing that women most desire?
 Beware the axe and say as I require.

'If you can't answer on the moment, though,
 I will concede you this: you are to go
 A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn
 Sufficient answer, then you shall return.
 I shall take gages from you to extort
 Surrender of your body to the court.'

Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,
 But there! All other choices were denied,
 And in the end he chose to go away
 And to return after a year and day
 Armed with such answer as there might be sent
 To him by God. He took his leave and went.

He knocked at every house, searched every place,
 Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.
 What could it be that women wanted most?
 But all the same he never touched a coast,
 Country or town in which there seemed to be
 Any two people willing to agree.

Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,
 'Honour,' said some, some 'Jollity and pleasure,'
 Some 'Gorgeous clothes' and others 'Fun in bed,'
 'To be oft widowed and remarried,' said
 Others again, and some that what most mattered
 Was that we should be cosseted and flattered.
 That's very near the truth, it seems to me;
 A man can win us best with flattery.
 To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,
 Ensnare us all, the best and worst of us.

Some say the things we most desire are these:
 Freedom to do exactly as we please,
 With no one to reprove our faults and lies,
 Rather to have one call us good and wise.
 Truly there's not a woman in ten score
 Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,
 But she will kick if what he says is true;
 You try it out and you will find so too.
 However vicious we may be within
 We like to be thought wise and void of sin.

Others assert we women find it sweet
 When we are thought dependable, discreet
 And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,
 Never betraying things that we are told.
 But that's not worth the handle of a rake;
 Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!
 Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?

Among some other little things, now stale,
 Ovid relates that under his long hair
 The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair
 Of ass's ears; as subtly as he might,
 He kept his foul deformity from sight;
 Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.
 He loved her best, and trusted in her too.
 He begged her not to tell a living creature
 That he possessed so horrible a feature.
 And she – she swore, were all the world to win,
 She would not do such villainy and sin
 As saddle her husband with so foul a name;
 Besides to speak would be to share the shame.
 Nevertheless she thought she would have died
 Keeping this secret bottled up inside;
 It seemed to swell her heart and she, no doubt,
 Thought it was on the point of bursting out.

Fearing to speak of it to woman or man,
 Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran
 And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire
 And, as a bittern bumbles in the mire,
 She whispered to the water, near the ground,
 'Betray me not, O water, with thy sound!
 To thee alone I tell it: it appears
 My husband has a pair of ass's ears!
 Ah! My heart's well again, the secret's out!
 I could no longer keep it, not a doubt.'
 And so you see, although we may hold fast
 A little while, it must come out at last,
 We can't keep secrets; as for Midas, well,
 Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.

This knight that I am telling you about
 Perceived at last he never would find out
 What it could be that women loved the best.
 Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast,
 As home he went, he dared no longer stay;
 His year was up and now it was the day.

As he rode home in a dejected mood
 Suddenly, at the margin of a wood,
 He saw a dance upon the leafy floor
 Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.
 Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn
 Some words of wisdom ere he should return;
 But lo! Before he came to where they were,
 Dancers and dance all vanished into air!
 There wasn't a living creature to be seen
 Save one old woman crouched upon the green.
 A fouler-looking creature I suppose
 Could scarcely be imagined. She arose
 And said, 'Sir knight, there's no way on from here.
 Tell me what you are looking for, my dear,
 For peradventure that were best for you;
 We old, old women know a thing or two.'
 'Dear Mother,' said the knight, 'alack the day!
 I am as good as dead if I can't say
 What thing it is that women most desire;
 If you could tell me I would pay your hire.'
 'Give me your hand,' she said, 'and swear to do
 Whatever I shall next require of you
 – If so to do should lie within your might –
 And you shall know the answer before night.'
 'Upon my honour,' he answered, 'I agree.'
 'Then,' said the crone, 'I dare to guarantee
 Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim.
 Upon my life the queen will say the same.
 Show me the very proudest of them all
 In costly coverchief or jewelled caul
 That dare say no to what I have to teach.
 Let us go forward without further speech.'

And then she crooned her gospel in his ear
And told him to be glad and not to fear.

They came to court. This knight, in full array,
Stood forth and said, 'O Queen, I've kept my day
And kept my word and have my answer ready.'

There sat the noble matrons and the heady
Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace
Of wisdom, all assembled in that place,
And there the queen herself was throned to hear
And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near
And silence was commanded through the hall.

The queen gave order he should tell them all
What thing it was that women wanted most.
He stood not silent like a beast or post,
But gave his answer with the ringing word
Of a man's voice and the assembly heard:

'My liege and lady, in general,' said he,
'A woman wants the self-same sovereignty*
Over her husband as over her lover,
And master him; he must not be above her.
That is your greatest wish, whether you kill
Or spare me; please yourself. I wait your will.'

In all the court not one that shook her head
Or contradicted what the knight had said;
Maid, wife and widow cried, 'He's saved his life!'

And on the word up started the old wife,
The one the knight saw sitting on the green,
And cried, 'Your mercy, sovereign lady queen!
Before the court disperses, do me right!
'Twas I who taught this answer to the knight,
For which he swore, and pledged his honour to it,
That the first thing I asked of him he'd do it,
So far as it should lie within his might.
Before this court I ask you then, sir knight,
To keep your word and take me for your wife;
For well you know that I have saved your life.
If this be false, deny it on your sword!'

'Alas!' he said, 'Old lady, by the Lord

I know indeed that such was my behest,
But for God's love think of a new request,
Take all my goods, but leave my body free.'
'A curse on us,' she said, 'if I agree!
I may be foul, I may be poor and old,
Yet will not choose to be, for all the gold
That's bedded in the earth or lies above,
Less than your wife, nay, than your very love!'

'My love?' said he. 'By heaven, my damnation!
Alas that any of my race and station
Should ever make so foul a misalliance!
Yet in the end his pleading and defiance
All went for nothing, he was forced to wed.
He takes his ancient wife and goes to bed.

Now peradventure some may well suspect
A lack of care in me since I neglect
To tell of the rejoicing and display
Made at the feast upon their wedding-day.
I have but a short answer to let fall;
I say there was no joy or feast at all,
Nothing but heaviness of heart and sorrow.
He married her in private on the morrow
And all day long stayed hidden like an owl,
It was such torture that his wife looked foul.

Great was the anguish churning in his head
When he and she were piloted to bed;
He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.
His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;
At last she said, 'Bless us! Is this, my dear,
How knights and wives get on together here?
Are these the laws of good King Arthur's house?
Are knights of his all so contemptuous?
I am your own beloved and your wife,
And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;
And certainly I never did you wrong.
Then why, this first of nights, so sad a song?
You're carrying on as if you were half-witted.
Say, for God's love, what sin have I committed?

I'll put things right if you will tell me how.'

'Put right?' he cried. 'That never can be now!

Nothing can ever be put right again!

You're old, and so abominably plain,

So poor to start with, so low-bred to follow;

It's little wonder if I twist and wallow!

God, that my heart would burst within my breast!

'Is that,' said she, 'the cause of your unrest?'

'Yes, certainly,' he said, 'and can you wonder?'

'I could set right what you suppose a blunder,

That's if I cared to, in a day or two,

If I were shown more courtesy by you.

Just now,' she said, 'you spoke of gentle birth,

Such as descends from ancient wealth and worth.

If that's the claim you make for gentlemen

Such arrogance is hardly worth a hen.

Whoever loves to work for virtuous ends,

Public and private, and who most intends

To do what deeds of gentleness he can,

Take him to be the greatest gentleman.

Christ wills we take our gentleness from Him,

Not from a wealth of ancestry long dim,

Though they bequeath their whole establishment

By which we claim to be of high descent.

Our fathers cannot make us a bequest

Of all those virtues that became them best

And earned for them the name of gentlemen,

But bade us follow them as best we can.

'Thus the wise poet of the Florentines,

Dante by name, has written in these lines,

For such is the opinion Dante launches:

"Seldom arises by these slender branches

Prowess of men, for it is God, no less,

Wills us to claim of Him our gentleness."

For of our parents nothing can we claim

Save temporal things, and these may hurt and maim.

'But everyone knows this as well as I;

For if gentility were implanted by

The natural course of lineage down the line,

Public or private, could it cease to shine

In doing the fair work of gentle deed?

No vice or villainy could then bear seed.

'Take fire and carry it to the darkest house

Between this kingdom and the Caucasus,

And shut the doors on it and leave it there,

It will burn on, and it will burn as fair

As if ten thousand men were there to see;

For fire will keep its nature and degree,

I can assure you, sir, until it dies.

'But gentleness, as you will recognize,

Is not annexed in nature to possessions.

Men fail in living up to their professions;

But fire never ceases to be fire.

God knows you'll often find, if you enquire,

Some lording full of villainy and shame.

If you would be esteemed for the mere name

Of having been by birth a gentleman

And stemming from some virtuous, noble clan,

And do not live yourself by gentle deed

Or take your father's noble code and creed,

You are no gentleman, though duke or earl.

Vice and bad manners are what make a churl.

'Gentility is only the renown

For bounty that your fathers handed down,

Quite foreign to your person, not your own;

Gentility must come from God alone.

That we are gentle comes to us by grace

And by no means is it bequeathed with place.

'Reflect how noble (says Valerius)

Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,

Who rose from poverty to nobleness.

And read Boethius, Seneca no less,

Thus they express themselves and are agreed:

"Gentle is he that does a gentle deed."

And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude

That even if my ancestors were rude,

Yet God on high – and so I hope He will –
Can grant me grace to live in virtue still,
A gentlewoman only when beginning
To live in virtue and to shrink from sinning.

'As for my poverty which you reprove,
Almighty God Himself in whom we move,
Believe and have our being, chose a life
Of poverty, and every man or wife
Nay, every child can see our Heavenly King
Would never stoop to choose a shameful thing.
No shame in poverty if the heart is gay,
As Seneca and all the learned say.

He who accepts his poverty unhurt
I'd say is rich although he lacked a shirt.
But truly poor are they who whine and fret
And covet what they cannot hope to get.
And he that, having nothing, covets not,
Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.

'True poverty can find a song to sing.
Juvenal says a pleasant little thing:
"The poor can dance and sing in the relief
Of having nothing that will tempt a thief."
Though it be hateful, poverty is good,
A great incentive to a livelihood,
And a great help to our capacity
For wisdom, if accepted patiently.
Poverty is, though wanting in estate,
A kind of wealth that none calumniate.
Poverty often, when the heart is lowly,
Brings one to God and teaches what is holy,
Gives knowledge of oneself and even lends
A glass by which to see one's truest friends.
And since it's no offence, let me be plain;
Do not rebuke my poverty again.

'Lastly you taxed me, sir, with being old:
Yet even if you never had been told
By ancient books, you gentlemen engage,
Yourselves in honour to respect old age.

To call an old man "father" shows good breeding,
And this could be supported from my reading.

'You say I'm old and fouler than a fen.
You need not fear to be a cuckold, then.
Filth and old age, I'm sure you will agree,
Are powerful wardens over chastity.
Nevertheless, well knowing your delights,
I shall fulfil your worldly appetites.

'You have two choices; which one will you try?
To have me old and ugly till I die,
But still a loyal, true, and humble wife
That never will displease you all her life,
Or would you rather I were young and pretty
And chance your arm what happens in a city
Where friends will visit you because of me,
Yes, and in other places too, maybe.
Which would you have? The choice is all your own.'

The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan
At last he said, with all the care in life,
'My lady and my love, my dearest wife,
I leave the matter to your wise decision.
You make the choice yourself, for the provision
Of what may be agreeable and rich
In honour to us both, I don't care which;
Whatever pleases you suffices me.'

'And have I won the mastery?' said she,
'Since I'm to choose and rule as I think fit?'
'Certainly, wife,' he answered her, 'that's it.'
'Kiss me,' she cried. 'No quarrels! On my oath
And word of honour, you shall find me both,
That is, both fair and faithful as a wife;
May I go howling mad and take my life
Unless I prove to be as good and true
As ever wife was since the world was new!
And if to-morrow when the sun's above
I seem less fair than any lady-love,
Than any queen or empress east or west,
Do with my life and death as you think best.

Cast up the curtain, husband. Look at me!

And when indeed the knight had looked to see,

Lo, she was young and lovely, rich in charms.

In ecstasy he caught her in his arms,

His heart went bathing in a bath of blisses

And melted in a hundred thousand kisses,

And she responded in the fullest measure

With all that could delight or give him pleasure.

So they lived ever after to the end

In perfect bliss; and may Christ Jesus send

Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed,

And grace to overbid them when we wed.

And - Jesu hear my prayer! - cut short the lives

Of those who won't be governed by their wives;

And all old, angry niggards of their pence,

God send them soon a very pestilence!