The Canterbury Tales

The Wife of Bath and her Tale
The Wife Of Bath’s Tale

Introduction

We remember the Wife of Bath, not so much for her tale as for Chaucer's account of her in the General Prologue and, above all, for her own Prologue. For one thing, the tale itself is a rather unremarkable folktale with a lecture on true nobility somewhat awkwardly incorporated. The tale is meant to illustrate the contention of her prologue: that a marriage in which the woman has the mastery is the best, and the conclusion of one closely coincides with the other. The tale also seems to express covertly her desire to be young and beautiful again. It is not a poor tale, but neither is it of unforgettable force like the Pardoner's or of unforgettable humor like the Miller's. Moreover, the Prologue is about three times as long as the tale to which it is supposed to be a short introduction. If that is appropriate for anyone, it is so for Alison of Bath, about whom everything is large to the point of exaggeration: her bulk, her clothes, her mouth, the number of her marriages, the extent of her travels, her zest for sex, her love of domination, her torrential delivery. The result is a portrait of someone for whom it is difficult to find an analogy in English literature except perhaps Shakespeare's Falstaff or some of the characters of Dickens.

She is wonderful company provided one is not married to her and can contemplate from a distance the fate of the sixth husband whom she is seeking as voraciously as she did his predecessors: "Welcome the sixth, when that ever he shall." Shall what? Have the temerity to get too close to this medieval Venus Flytrap, and be devoured?

Oddly enough, this unforgettable ebullient figure is an amalgam of many features derived from Chaucer's reading. Many of the traits he attributes to her are essentially borrowed from that favorite of the Middle Ages, the long French poem The Romance of the Rose. She also embodies traits in women which misogynistic Church Fathers like Jerome and Tertullian denounced in their writings. All this illustrates what wonderfully creative work can be done with old material. The medievals liked to think that their tales were not original, that they were renewed versions of old authors who had become "authorities." Here Chaucer borrows
very freely, and it is interesting to observe the result. While the elements are not original but largely borrowed from a variety of sources, the final product is the unforgettably original creation that is the Wife.

The Wife has attracted attention and comment over the centuries in abundance in contrast to, say, that pleasant and attractive lady, the Prioress. One reason is the intense personal quality that emanates from the character. Take her way of referring to herself or to women in general. Whether she is holding forth in her Prologue or telling her Tale, her pronouns slip with an engaging ease from "they" to "we" to "I" or from "women" to "we" to "I" or the other way round. Her talk is intensely hers, incapable of being confused with that of anyone else. As she is telling how she always made provision for another husband if her current victim died, she loses the thread of her discourse for a second, but only for a second:

"But now, sir, let me see what shall I sayn?
Aha, I have my tale again (585-6).

As she is telling her folktale of the knight and the old hag, she refers to the classical story of Midas, and immediately wants to tell it:

"Will you hear the tale? (951).

Her Prologue is, above all, about her—her experiences of love in and out of marriage, and her right to hold forth on that subject in spite of the "authority" of clerics who know nothing about the matter. A much-married woman, she has much more "authority" on love and marriage than any celibate clerk who knows only books, and she knows how to deal with books that do not please her too. Her outpouring is a confession of sorts but without a trace of the penitent's "mea culpa," for as she recalls with relish: "I have had my world as in my time." The only thing she regrets is that age "Hath me bereft my beauty and my pith."

Hers is the first contribution to the Marriage Group, and it is answered in one way or another by the Tales of the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Franklin. She asks her fellow pilgrims to take it "not agrief of what I say / For my intent is not but for to play " (191-192), but the force of her polemic and her personality has attracted far more attention from readers early and late than most other characters on that famous pilgrimage.
In the *Wife of Bath* we have one of only three women on the pilgrimage. Unlike the other two she is not a nun, but a much-married woman, a widow yet again. Everything about her is exaggerated: she has been married five times, has been to Jerusalem three times, and her hat and hips are as large as her sexual appetite and her love of talk.

A good WIFE was there of besidé Bath
But she was somedeal deaf, and that was scath.
Her coverchiefs full finè were of ground;
I dursté swear they weighhèden ten pound
That on a Sunday were upon her head.
Her hosen weren of fine scarlet red
Full straight y-tied, and shoes full moist and new.
Bold was her face and fair and red of hue.
She was a worthy woman all her life.

460 Husbands at churchè door she had had five,
Without other company in youth,
But thereof needeth not to speak as nouth.
And thrice had she been at Jerusalem.
She had passèd many a strangè stream.
At Romè she had been and at Boulogne,
In Galicia at St James and at Cologne.
She couldè much of wandering by the way.¹
Gat-toothèd was she, soothly for to say.
Upon an ambler easily she sat
Y-wimpled well,² and on her head a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a targe,
A foot mantle about her hipples large,
And on her feet a pair of spurs sharp.
In fellowship well could she laugh and carp.
Of remedies of love she knew perchance
For she could of that art the oldè dance.³

PROLOGUE to the WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The Wife’s narrative opens with a defense of her many marriages, all legal, as she points out, i.e. recognized by the Church even though some churchmen frowned on widows re-marrying. The Wife challenges anyone to show her where the Scripture sets a limit to the number of successive legal marriages a person can have in a lifetime. She claims that, because she has lots of experience of marriage, she is more of an authority on that subject than the celibate “authorities” who write about it. And she knows how to use “authorities” too, if it comes to it, as the many marginal references in our text show.

Experience, though no authority

¹ 467: Chaucer does not explain, and the reader is probably not expected to ask, how the Wife managed to marry five husbands and take in pilgrimage as almost another occupation. Going to Jerusalem from England three times was an extraordinary feat in the Middle Ages. This list is, like some others in the Prologue, a deliberate exaggeration, as is everything else about the Wife.

² 470: A wimple was a woman’s cloth headgear covering the ears, the neck and the chin.

³ 476: She knew all about that.
Were in this world, is right enough for me
To speak of woe that is in marriage;¹
For, lordings, since I twelve years was of age,²
(Thanked be God that is etern alive)
Husbands at church door I have had five,
(If I so often might have wedded be).
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But me was told certain not long ago is,
(To) me
That since that Christ ne went never but once
To wedding, in the Cane of Galilee,
That by the same example taught he me,
That I ne should wedded be but once.³
Lo, hark eke which a sharp word for the nonce⁴
Beside a well Jesus, God and man,
Spoke in reproof of the Samaritan:
`Thou hast had five husbandes,' quod he;
`And that ilk man which that now hath thee,
Is not thy husband.' Thus he said certain;
What that he meant thereby, I cannot sayn.
But that I ask why that the fifth man
Was no husband to the Samaritan?
How many might she have in marriage?

¹ 1-3: "Even if no 'authorities' had written on the subject, my own experience is quite enough for me to speak with authority on the woes of marriage." By authorities she means the Bible, theologians and classical authors.

² 4. Lordings means something like "Ladies and gentlemen." Twelve was the legal canonical age for girls to marry. Marriages took place at the door of the church followed by mass inside.

³ 9-13: Jerome, one of the more ascetic of the Church Fathers, suggested that because Jesus is recorded as having attended only one wedding, people should not marry more than once. The Wife scoffs at this peculiar thinking.

⁴ 14-16: "Now listen also to what sharp words Jesus, who is God and man, spoke on one occasion (for the nonce) when he reproved the Samaritan woman at the well." In the Gospel of John (4:4-26) Jesus tells a Samaritan woman whom he meets as she is drawing water from a well, but whom he has not seen before, that she has had five husbands, and that the man she is now living with is not her husband. He does not say why her present partner is not her husband.
WIFE OF BATH’S TALE

Yet heard I never tellen in mine age

Upon this number definition;
Men may divine and glossen up and down.
But well I wot, express without a lie,
God bade us for to wax and multiply;
That gentle text can I well understand.

Eke well I wot he said that my husband
Should let father and mother, and take to me;
But of no number mention made he,
Of bigamy or of octogamy;¹
Why should men then speak of it villainy?

Holy men in the Bible had more wives than one

Lo, here the wisé king Daun Solomon;
I trowé he had wivês many a one. ¹
(As would to God it lawful were to me
To be refreshèd half so oft as he).
Which gift of God had he for all his wivês!²

No man hath such, that in this world alive is.

God wot, this noble king, as to my wit,
The firsté night had many a merry fit
With each of them, so well was him alive.
Blessed be God that I have wedded five. ³

¹ 33. "Bigamy" here means being married twice but not to two people at the same time. "Octogamy" = 8 marriages in a row. Later, however, the Wife seems to use the term "bigamy" in the sense of the sin or crime of bigamy (l.86).

² 39: This line means either that the gift was from God to him in granting him so many wives, or from Solomon to them, probably the former.

³ 44a-44f: The following six lines do not appear in any Six Text MS, but they have been accepted by scholars as genuine Chaucer, and appear in many editions.
Welcome the sixthè when that ever he shall,  
For since I will not keep me chaste in all  
When my husband is from the worldè gone,  
Some Christian man shall weddè me anon.  
For then, the apostle says that I am free  
Paul (I Cor VII, 9)

To wed, on Godè's half, where it liketh me.  
He says that to be wedded is no sin;  
Better is to be wedded than to brinne.  
What recketh me though folk say villainy  
Of shrewèd Lamech and his bigamy? ¹

I wot well Abraham was a holy man,  
And Jacob eke, as far as ever I can,  
And each of them had wivès more than two,  
And many another holy man also.

Virginity is good, but is nowhere demanded by God

Where can you see in any manner age  
That highè God defended mariage  
By express word? I pray you telleth me.  
Or where commanded he virginity?  
I wot as well as you (it is no dread)  
The apostle, when he speaks of maidenhead,  
He said that precept thereof had he none.  
Men may counsel a woman to be one,  
But counselling is no commandément;  
He put it in our ownè judgèment.  
For haddè God commanded maidenhead,

Then had he damnèd wedding with the deed.  
And certès, if there were no seed y-sow,  
Virginity then whereof should it grow?  
Paul durstè not commanden at the least

¹ 53-4: "What do I care if people speak ill of bad Lamech and his bigamy?" Though Lamech is the first man mentioned in the Bible as taking two wives, other more famous patriarchs did also, as she points out in the following lines.
A thing of which his Master gave no hest.

The dart is set up for virginity.

Catch whoso may, who runneth best let's see.

But this word is not take of every wight,

But there as God will give it of His might.

I wot well that the apostle was a maid,

But natheless, though that he wrote or said

He would that every wight were such as he,

All n'is but counsel to virginity.

And for to be a wife he gave me leave

Of indulgence,¹ so n'is it no reprove

To weddè me, if that my makè die,

Without exception of bigamy,

All were it good no woman for to touch,

(He meant as in his bed or in his couch)

For peril is both fire and tow to assemble;

You know what this example may resemble.

This all and some: he held virginity

More perfect than wedding in frailty:

(Frailty clepe I, but if that he and she

Would leaden all their life in chastity).

I grant it well, I have of none envy,²

Though maidenhead preferé bigamy;

It likes them to be clean in body and ghost.

Of mine estate ne will I make no boast.

Virginity is not for everyone

For well you know, a lord in his household

Ne has not every vessel all of gold;

Some be of tree and do their lord service.

God clepeth folk to him in sundry wise,

¹ 83-4: "He gave me leave out of indulgence (for human weakness)" or "He gave me leave to indulge."

² 95: "I grant that readily. I am not envious if virginity is regarded as preferable to being married more than once."
And ever each has of God a proper gift,
Some this, some that, as that him liketh shift.

Virginty is great perfection,
And continence eke with devotion.
But Christ, that of perfection is well,
Bade not every wight he should go sell
All that he had and give it to the poor,

And in such wise follow him and his foul;
He spoke to them that will live perfectly.
And, lordings, (by your leave) that am not I.
I will bestow the flower of all mine age
In the actes and the fruit of mariage.

If virginity were for everyone, why do we all have sexual organs?

Tell me also, to what conclusion
Were members made of generation,
And of so perfect wise a wright y-wrought? ¹
Trusteth me well, they were not made for nought.
Gloss whoso will, and say both up and down,

That they were made for purgation
Of urine, and our bothe thinges small ²
Was eke to know a female from a male,
And for no other cause. Say you no?
The experience wot well it is not so.

So that the clerkes be not with me wroth,
I say this, that they makéd be for both,
This is to say, for office and for ease
Of engendrure, where we not God displease.

That man shall yield unto his wife her debt?
Now wherewith should he make his payement,
If he ne used his silly instrument? ¹
Then were they made upon a creature
To purge urine, and eke for engendrure. ²

Marriage is not for everyone either

135  But I say not that every wight is hold,
That has such harness as I to you told,
To go and usen them in engendrure;
Then should men take of chastity no cure.
Christ was a maid, and shapen as a man,
140  And many a saint, since that this world began,
And let us wiv hot barley bread.

But marriage is for Alison

145  And yet with barley bread, Mark tellè can,
Our Lord Jesus refreshèd many a man. ³
In such estate as God has clepèd us
I'll persevere; I am not precious.
In wifehood will I use mine instrument
150  As freely as my Maker has it sent.
If I be daungerous God give me sorrow.
My husband shall it have both eve and morrow.
When that him list come forth and pay his debt.
A husband will I have, I will not let,

¹ 132. Theologians wrote that in marriage each partner had an obligation to satisfy the other's sexual need—hence a debt that required payment when called for. This is one of the few theological teachings that appeals to the Wife, at least when she is the creditor.

² 142. As in many other places in Chaucer, the double negative is not bad grammar.

³ 145-6: Probably a reference to the occasion where Christ miraculously multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed a hungry multitude. See Mark 6: 38 ff
155 Which shall be both my debtor and my thrall, 
And have his tribulation withall 
Upon his flesh while that I am his wife. 
I have the power during all my life 
Upon his proper body, and not he; 

Right thus the apostle told it unto me, 
And bade our husbands for to love us well. 
All this sentence me liketh every deal."

An interruption from an unexpected quarter

Up starts the Pardoner, and that anon; 
"Now, Dame," quod he, "by God and by Saint John, 
You be a noble preacher in this case. 
I was about to wed a wife, alas! 
What! Should I buy it on my flesh so dear? 
Yet had I lever wed no wife to-year." 1 
"Abide," quod she, "my tale is not begun. 
Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tun 
Ere that I go, shall savor worse than ale. 
And when that I have told thee forth my tale 
Of tribulation in marriage, 
Of which I am expert in all mine age, 
(This is to say, myself has been the whip) 
Then may'st thou choose whether thou wilt sip 
Of thilk tunne, that I shall abroach. 
Beware of it, ere thou too nigh approach, 
For I shall tell examples more than ten. 

Whoever will not 
By him shall other men corrected be. 
These same wordes writeth Ptolemy; 
Read in his Almagest, and take it there." 
"Dame, I would pray you, if your will it were," 

Said this Pardoner, "as you began,

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1 166-8: "I had rather not marry this year." If the reader remembers the description of the Pardoner from the General Prologue, it will be obvious that he could never be interested in women or marriage, a fact that leaves one free to speculate about why he should make this remark to the Wife, whom he addresses as Dame, a polite, not a slang, usage.
Tell forth your tale, and spareth for no man,  
And teacheth us young men of your practice."

“Don’t take too seriously what I am going to say,” she advises

"Gladly," quod she, "since that it may you like.  
But that I pray to all this company,

190 If that I speak after my fantasy,  
As taketh not a-grief of what I say,  
For my intent is not but for to play.  
Now, sir, then will I tell you forth my tale.  
As ever may I drinken wine or ale

195 I shall say sooth: the husbands that I had  
As three of them were good, and two were bad.  
The three men were good and rich and old.  
Unnethè mighten they the statute hold  
In which that they were bounden unto me.

200 You wot well what I mean of this, pardee.  
As God me help, I laughé when that I think,  
How piteously a-night I made them swink.

How to control husbands: with relentless nagging

But by my fay, I told of it no store:  
They had me given their land and their treasúre,  
Me needed not do longer diligence ¹  
To win their love, or do them reverence.  
They lovèd me so well, by God above,  
That I ne told no dainty of their love.  
A wisè woman will busy her ever in one  
To get her love, yea, where as she has none,  
But since I had them wholly in my hand,  
And since that they had given me all their land,  
What should I taken keep them for to please  
But it were for my profit, or mine ease?

210 I set them so a-workè, by my fay,

¹ 205. "I no longer needed to take pains" (lit. “It was no longer necessary to me”).
That many a night they sungen `Welaway!'  
The bacon was not fetched for them, I trow,  
That some men have in Essex at Dunmow. ¹
I governed them so well after my law, according to
That each of them full blissful was and faw  
To bringé me gay thingès from the fair.  
They were full glad when I spoke to them fair,  
For God it wot, I chid them spitously.  
Now hearken how I bore me properly.  
You wisé wivès that can understand,  
Thus shall you speak and bear them wrong on hand,  
For half so boldély can there no man  
Swear and lie as a woman can.  
(I say not this by wivès that be wise,  
But it be when they them misadvise).  
A wisé wife, if that she can her good,  
Shall bearen him on hand the chough is wood,  
And také witness of her owné maid  
Of her assent. ² But hearken how I said:  
`Sir oldé kaynard, is this thine array? ³  
Why is my neigébouré's wife so gay?  
She is honouréd overall there she goes.  
I sit at home; I have no thrifty clothes.  
What dost thou at my neigébouré's house?  
Is she so fair?  Art thou so amorous?  
What rown you with our maid, ben'dicitee?  
Sir oldé lecher, let thy yapès be.  
And if I have a gossip or a friend  
Withouten guilt, thou chidest as a fiend

¹ 218: The Dunmow Flitch of bacon, awarded every year to the couple who had not quarreled all year or regretted their marriage.

² 231-34: "A woman who knows what is good for her will convince her husband that 'the crow is mad', and call her maid to witness for her." In a well-known folktale a talking bird (a chough or crow) sees a woman committing adultery, and tells her husband. But with the help of her maid, the wife is able to convince the husband that the bird is talking nonsense. The wife is less lucky in Chaucer's version of that story, *The Manciple's Tale.*

³ 235: *thine array* means either "your way of behaving" or (more probably) "the clothes you let me have."
WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

If that I walk or play unto his house, enjoy myself at
Thou comest home as drunken as a mouse
And preachest on thy bench —— with evil preef! evil take you!

What husbands preach and complain about -- marriage, mostly

Thou sayst to me it is a great mischief
To wed a pooré woman for costáge. expense
And if that she be rich, of high paráge, birth
Then sayst thou that it is a tormentry
To suffer her pride and her meláncoly. every side
And if that she be fair (Thou very knave!) if she's pretty, you wretch
Thou sayst that every holor will her have; lecher
She may no while in chastity abide
That is assailèd upon each a side. every side
Thou sayst some folk desire us for richesse, riches
Some for our shape and some for our fairness, beauty
And some for she can either sing or dance,
And some for gentleness and dalliance, playfulness
Some for their handés and their armés small. account
Thus goes all to the devil, by thy tale.
Thou sayst men may not keep a castle wall
It may so long assailèd be overall. (If) it
And if that she be foul, thou sayst that she ugly
Coveteth every man that she may see,
For as a spaniel she will on him leap
to buy her
Till she may findé some man her to cheap.
Ne none so gray goose goes there in the lake,

As, sayst thou, that will be without a make, mate
And sayst it is a hard thing for to yield
give away
A thing that no man will, his thankès, held. gladly take
Thus sayst thou, lorel, when thou goest to bed, old fool

1 256: For the 25 lines or so following 256 notice the array of pronouns the Wife uses interchangeably: us, she, I, their. She also has a disconcerting habit of switching from they to he and back when speaking of her husbands.

2 271-2: A difficult couplet, meaning, perhaps "It is hard to give away a thing that no man will gladly take."
And that no wise man needeth for to wed,
Nor no man that intendeth unto heaven.
With wildè thunder dint and fiery leven
May thy weleke neckè be tobroke!
Thou sayest that dripping houses and eke smoke
And chiding wive's maken men to flee
Out of their ownè house. Ah, ben'citee!
What aileth such an old man for to chide!
Thou sayst we wive's will our vices hide
Till we be fast, and then we will them show.
Well may that be the proverb of a shrew.
Thou sayst that oxen, asses, horses, hounds,
They be assayèd at diversè stounds.
Basins, lavers, ere that men them buy,
Spoonès and stools, and all such husbandry,
And so be pots, clothès, and array;
But folk of wive's maken no assay,
Till they be wedded. (Oldè dotard shrew!)
And then, sayst thou, we will our vices show.

I accused my husbands of jealousy, possessiveness and cheapness
Thou sayst also, that it displeaseth me,
But if that thou wilt praisen my beauty,
And but thou pore always upon my face,
And clepe me fairè dame in every place,
And but thou make a feast on thilkè day
That I was born, and make me fresh and gay,
And but thou do unto my nurse honoúr,
And to my chamberer within my bower,
And to my father's folk, and mine allies.
Thus sayest thou, old barrel full of lies!

My vehement counter-claims and challenge
And yet of our apprenticè Jankin,
For his crisp hair, shining as gold so fine,
And for he squireth me both up and down,
WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

Yet hast thou caught a false suspicion:
I will him not, though thou were dead to-morrow. I wouldn't have him
But tell me this, why hidest thou— with sorrow!— bad luck to you!
The keyes of thy chest away from me?

310 It is my good as well as thine, pardee. my property / by God
What, ween'st thou make an idiot of our dame?¹
Now by that lord that callèd is Saint Jame,
Thou shalt not bothè -- though that thou were wood -- mad
Be master of my body and my good;

315 That one thou shalt forego maugre thine eyen. in spite of y. eyes
What helpeth it of me inquire and spyen? about me
I trow thou wouldest lock me in thy chest. I guess
Thou shouldst say: 'Fair wife, go where thee lest;
Take your disport; I will not 'lieve no talès;

320 I know you for a true wife, Dame Alice.' Have fun / believe
We love no man, that taketh keep or charge takes notice or account
Where that we go; we will be at our large. we want freedom
Of allè men y-blessèd may he be
The wise astrologer Daun Ptolemy,

325 That says this proverb in his Almagest: cares not who rules
`Of allè men his wisdom is the highest,
That recketh not who has the world in hand.'
By this provérb thou shalt well understand:
Have thou enough, what thar thee reck or care What need you?

330 How merrily that other folkés fare? ²
For certès, oldè dotard, by your leave, certainly, old fool
You shall have quainté right enough at eve. sex / evening
He is too great a niggard that will wern miser / refuse
A man to light a candle at his lantern;³

335 He shall have never the lessè light, pardee. by God

¹ 311: "Do you think (weenest thou) that you can make an idiot of this lady?" (herself).

² 329-30: "If you have enough, why do you care how well other people do?"

³ 333-4: “He is too great a miser who will refuse a man a light from his lantern.” This is the Wife’s interesting metaphor for sexual freedom. The word quaint is a vulgarism or a euphemism for the female sexual organ. See also later quoniam and belle chose (literally “beautiful thing”).
Have thou enough, thee thar not 'plain thee. *need not complain*

*I attacked complaints about expensive clothes, and I claimed my freedom*

Thou sayst also, if that we make us gay
With clothing and with precious array,
That it is peril of our chastity.

340 And yet—With sorrow!—thou must enforce thee

And sayst these words in the apostle's name:

`In habit made with chastity and shame`

You women shall apparel you,' quod he,
`And not in tressèd hair, and gay perree,
As pearls, nor with gold, nor clothes rich.'

After thy text, nor after thy rubric
I will not work as muchel as a gnat.

Thou saidest this, that I was like a cat;
For whoso that would singe a cat's skin,

Then would the cat well dwellen in its inn;
And if the cat's skin be sleek and gay,
She will not dwell in house half a day,
But forth she will ere any day be dawed,
To show her skin and go a caterwawed.

This is to say, if I be gay, sir shrew,
I will run out, my borel for to show.
Sir oldè fool, what helpeth thee to spy?
Though thou pray Argus with his hundred eyes
To be my wardecorps, as he can best,

In faith he shall not keep me but me lest;

*I nagged him about his (imaginary) nagging*

Yet could I make his beard, so may I thee.

Thou saidest eke, that there be thingès three,
The which things greatly trouble all this earth.

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1 340: "And yet, blast you, you have to reinforce your opinion" (by quoting the Bible).

2 361: "Still I could deceive him, I promise you." If *thee* is the verb "to prosper" rather than a pronoun, *so may I thee* means "So may I prosper,"
And that no wight may endure the fourth.

O leve sir shrewè, Jesus short thy life!

Yet preachest thou and sayst a hateful wife

Y-reckoned is for one of these mischances.

Be there no other manner résemblánces?  

That you may liken your parables to

But if a silly wife be one of tho’?

Thou likenest ekè woman’s love to hell,
To barren land, where water may not dwell.
Thou likenest it also to wildè fire;
The more it burns, the more it has desire

To cónsume everything that burnt will be.
Thou sayest: ’Right as wormès shend a tree,
Right so a wife destroyeth her husband;
This knowen they that be to wivès bound.’

An admission

Lordings, right thus, as you have understand,

Bore I stiffly mine old husbands on hand

That thus they saiden in their drunkenness;
And all was false, but as I took witness
On Jankin and upon my niece also.  

O Lord, the pain I did them and the woe

Full guiltèless, by Godè’s sweetè pine!
For as a horse, I couldè bite and whine;
I couldè ‘plain and I was in the guilt,
Or elsé often time I had been spilt.
Whoso that first to millè comes, first grint.
I ’plainèd first, so was our war y-stint.  

1 368: Are there no other kinds of comparison?

2 382-3: “I called Jankin and my niece as witnesses, although it was all a lie”, i.e. her accusations were a fabrication; she was putting words into the mouths of her husbands which they had never spoken.

3 389-90: “The first one to the mill is the first to get the corn ground. I complained first, and so the battle was over.” Whoever strikes first, wins.
CANTERBURY TALES

They were full glad to excusen them full blive quickly
Of things of which they never a-guilt their lives. never guilty in their lives
Of wenches would I bearen them on hand, accuse falsely
When that for sick they might unnethé stand, sickness / barely
Yet tickled I his hearté for that he
Wend that I had of him so great charity. thought / love

I had a trick for getting out of the house:

a false but flattering accusation

I swore that all my walking out by night
Was for to spy on wenches that he dight. girls he slept with
Under that color had I many a mirth.

For all such wit is given us in our birth:
Deceit, weeping, spinning, God has give by nature
To women kindly, while that they may live.
And thus of one thing I avaunté me, I boast
At th'end I had the better in each degree, in every way

By sleight or force or by some manner thing, By trickery
As by continual murmur or grousing; grumbling

Sexual refusal as a weapon

Namely a-bed, there hadden they mischance, Especially / bad luck
There would I chide, and do them no pleasance.
I would no longer in the bed abide,

If that I felt his arm over my side,
Till he had made his ransom unto me;
Then would I suffer him to do his nicety. allow him
And therefore every man this tale I tell:
Win whoso may, for all is for to sell. whoever can

1 391-4: "They were glad to be excused quickly from things they had never been guilty of in their lives. I would accuse them of having girls (wenches) when they were so sick they could barely stand."

2 395-6: 'I tickled his vanity by making him think I loved him so.' Note again the slippage of pronouns from they, them to his, him in the preceding lines and below. The same thing happens with I, us, women in the following lines, a feature of the Wife's style.
415 With empty hand men may no hawkès lure.
For winning would I all his lust endure,
And makè me a feignèd appetite,
And yet in bacon had I never delight.
That madè me that ever I would them chide.

Relentless nagging

420 For though the Pope had sitten them beside,
I would not spare them at their ownè board.
For by my truth I quit them word for word.
As help me very God omnipotent,
Though I right now should make my testament,
I owe them not a word that it n'is quit.
I brought it so aboutè by my wit
That they must give it up, as for the best,
Or elsè had we never been in rest.
For though he lookèd as a wood lion,
Yet should he fail of his conclusion.

Another tactic: I would ask him to be reasonable and yield

Then would I say: `Now, goodè leve, take keep,
How meekly looketh Willikins our sheep!
Come near, my spouse, and let me ba thy cheek.
You should be allè patient and meek,
And have a sweetè spicèd conscience.
Since you so preach of Job's patience,
Suffereth always, since you so well can preach,
And but you do, certain we shall you teach
That it is fair to have a wife in peace.
One of us two must bowè doubtèless,
And since a man is morè reasonable
Than woman is, you mustè be sufferable.
What aileth you to grouchè thus and groan?
Is it for you would have my quaint alone? ¹  
Why, take it all.  Lo, have it every deal.
Peter, I shrew you, but you love it well.²  
For if I wouldè sell my belle chose,
I couldè walk as fresh as is a rose,
But I will keep it for your ownè tooth.
You be to blame, by God, I say you sooth.'
Such manner wordès haddè we in hand.

My fourth husband played the field, but I got even

Now will I speaken of my fourth husband.
My fourthè husband was a reveller;
This is to say, he had a paramour,
And I was young and full of ragery,
Stubborn and strong, and jolly as a pie.
How I could dancè to a harpè small!
And sing, y-wis, as any nightingale
When I had drunk a draught of sweetè wine.
Metellius, the foulè churl, the swine,
That with a staff bereft his wife her life
For she drank wine, though I had been his wife,
Ne should he not have daunted me from drink.
And after wine, of Venus most I think,
For all so siker as cold engenders hail,
A likerous mouth must have a likerous tail.³
In woman vinolent is no defense,
This knownè lechers by experience.

A parenthesis: the pleasure of nostalgia -- and the regret

But, Lord Christ, when that it remembereth me

¹ 444: “Is it because you want my body sexually for yourself alone?” See earlier note on quaint.
² 446: "By St. Peter, I declare that you really love it very much."
³ 466: Probably a pun on liquorous (liquored) and likerous (lecherous), as well as on tail.
Upon my youth, and on my jollity,  
It tickleth me about my heartè's root.  
Unto this day it does my heartè boot  
That I have had my world as in my time.  
But age, alas! that all will envenime,  
hath me bereft my beauty and my pith.  
Let go! Farewell! The devil go therewith!  
The flour is gone; there is no more to tell.  
The bran, as I best can, now must I sell.  
But yet to be right merry will I fond.  
Now will I tellen of my fourth husband.

My revenge

I say I had in heartè great despite,  
That he of any other had delight;  
But he was quit, by God and by Saint Joce:  
I made him of the samè wood a cross,  
Not of my body in no foul mannèr,  
But certainly I madè folk such cheer,¹  
That in his ownè grease I made him fry  
For anger and for very jealousy.

God knows  
When that his shoe full bitterly him wrung. ²  
There was no wight, save God and he, that wist  
In many wise how sorely I him twist.

He died when I came from Jerusalem,  
And lies y-grave under the roodè-beam,  
All is his tombè not so curious  
As was the sepulchre of him, Darius,  
Which that Apelles wroughtè subtly.

¹ 486: "I was so pleasant to folk (men) ....." that is, she was a great flirt.

² 492: "... when his shoe pinched him severely." He often had to put on a good face when in fact he was hurting badly.
500 It is but waste to bury them preciously. expensively
Let him farewell, God give his soulé rest. coffin
He is now in his grave and in his chest.

*I married my fifth husband for love. He managed me.*

Now of my fifthé husband will I tell.
God let his soulé never come in Hell.
505 And yet was he to me the mosté shrew; roughest
That feel I on my ribbes all by row,
And ever shall, unto mine ending day.
But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
And therewithal he could so well me glose,
sweet-talk me
I trow, I loved him besté for that he
Was of his lové daungerous to me.

510 When that he wouldé have my belle chose,
That, though he had me beat in every bone,
He couldé win again my love anon.
promptly
I trow, I loved him besté for that he
515 We woman have, if that I shall not lie,
In this matter a quainté fantasy.
odd caprice
Wait what thing we may not lightly have,
Forbid us thing, and that desiren we;
520 Press on us fast, and thenné will we flee.
With daunger outen we all our chaffare; ¹ bring out our goods
Great press at market maketh dearer ware,
great demand / goods
And too great cheap is held at little price.
market supply
This knoweth every woman that is wise.

525 My fifthé husband, God his soulé bless,
Which that I took for love and not richesse, was once a student
He sometime was a clerk of Oxenford,
to lodge
And had left school, and went at home to board

521-523: "When there is reluctance (daunger) to buy, then we bring out all our merchandise (chaffare). Great market demand makes things more expensive (dearer); too great a supply (cheap) reduces the price." If her wares are much in demand, then the customer has to pay heavily; if the customer shows small interest, she has to seduce him to buy.
With my gossip, dwelling in our town.  

530 God have her soul, her name was Alison.  

She knew my heart and all my privity,  

Bet than our parish priest, so may I thee.  

To her bewrayéd I my counsel all;  

For, had my husband pisséd on a wall,  

535 Or done a thing that should have cost his life,  

To her and to another worthy wife  

And to my niece which that I lovéd well,  

I would have told his counsel every deal,  

And so I did full often, God it wot,  

That made his facé often red and hot  

For very shame, and blamed himself for he  

Had told to me so great a privity.  

How I wooed Jankin, who became my fifth husband

And so befell that oncè in a Lent,  

(So often times I to my gossip went,  

545 For ever yet I lovéd to be gay,  

And for to walk in March, April, and May  

From house to house, to hearen sundry talés)  

That Jankin Clerk, and my gossip, Dame Alice,  

And I myself, into the fieldés went.  

550 My husband was at London all that Lent;  

I had the better leisure for to play,  

And for to see, and eke for to be seen  

Of lusty folk. What wist I where my grace  

Was shapen for to be, or in what place?  

1  

555 Therefore made I my visitatïons  

To vigils, and to processïons,  

To evening services  

To preachings eke, and to these pilgrimáges,  

To plays of miracles,  

To marriáges,  

1 553-4: "How could I know what or where my fortune was destined to be?"

2 558: Miracle plays (also known as mystery plays) were short plays based on biblical events. Noah’s wife in one of these was a forceful character rather like Alison.
And weared upon my gayé scarlet gites.  

560 These wormès nor these mothès nor these mites  
(Upon my peril!) fret them never a deal.  
And wost thou why? For they were usèd well.  
Now will I tellen forth what happened me: 
I say, that in the fieldès walkèd we, 

565 Till truly we had such dalliance  
This clerk and I, that of my purveyance 
I spoke to him, and said him how that he, 
If I were widow, shouldèd wedden me. 
For certainly, I say for no bobbance, 

570 Yet was I never without purveyance  
Of marriage, nor of other thingës eke. 
I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek, 
That has but one hole for to start into, 
And if that failè, then is all y-do. 

575 I borè him on hand he had enchanted me 
(My damë taughtè me that subtlety); 
And eke I said, I mett of him all night, 
He would have slain me, as I lay upright, ¹ 
And all my bed was full of very blood; 

580 `But yet I hope that you shall do me good,  
For blood betokens gold, as me was taught,' 
And all was false, I dreamed of it right naught, 
But I followèd aye my damë's lore, ² 
As well of that as of other thingës more. 

585 But now, sir, let me see, what shall I sayn? 
Aha! by God, I have my tale again. 

At the funeral of my fourth husband my thoughts were not on the dead 

When that my fourthè husband was on bier, 
I wept algate and madè sorry cheer, ³ 

¹ 577-79: The sexual implication of her pretend dreamwork is fairly obvious. 

² 583: "I followed always my mother's teaching." 

³ 588: "I wept indeed, and put on a sad appearance."
As wivès mustè, for it is uságe, 

590  And with my kerchief covered my viságe;  
But, for that I was purveyed of a make,¹ 
I wept but small, and that I undertake.  
   To churchè was my husband borne a-morrow
   With néighbours that for him madé sorrow,

595  And Jankin, ouré clerk, was one of tho'.

As help me God, when that I saw him go
After the bier, methought he had a pair
Of leggès and of feet so clean and fair
That all my heart I gave unto his hold.

600  He was, I trowè, twenty winters old
And I was forty, if I shall say sooth,
But yet I had always a colté's tooth.

My attractions

Gat-toothed I was, and that became me well:
I had the print of Sainté Venus' seal.²

605  As help me God, I was a lusty one,
And fair, and rich, and young, and well begone;
And truly, as mine husbands toldè me,
I had the besté quoniam might be,  
   “chamber of Venus”
For certès I am all Venerian

610  In feeling, and my heart is Martian;
Venus me gave my lust and likerousness,
And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.
Mine áscendent was Taur, and Mars therein.

I loved sex

¹ 591: "Because I was assured of (or provided with) a husband."

² 604: She was gap-toothed, a mark of Venus, the goddess and planet under whose influence she was born. Being gap-toothed was regarded in the Middle Ages as a sign of a strongly-sexed nature, making one a disciple of Venus, the patron saint (!) of Love. Venerian (below) is the adjective from Venus as Martian is from Mars, the god of war and the lover of Venus. Lines 609-12 and 619-26 are not in Hgw MS.
Alas! alas! that ever love was sin!

615 I followed aye mine inclination
By virtue of my constellation
That madè me that I could not withdraw
My chamber of Venus from a good fellow.
Yet have I Mars's mark upon my face,

620 And also in another privy place.
For God so wise be my salvation,
I lovèd never by no discretion,
But ever followed mine appetite
All were he short or long or black or white.

625 I took no keep, so that he likèd me,
How poor he was, nor eke of what degree.

Within a month I married Jankin and gave him control of my property ( alas),
but not of my movements

What should I say? but at the monthè's end
This jolly clerk Jankin, that was so hend,
Has wedded me with great solemnity,

630 And to him gave I all the land and fee
That ever was me given therebefore,
But afterward repented me full sore.
He wouldè suffer nothing of my list.
By God, he smote me once upon the list,

635 For that I rent out of his book a leaf,
That of the stroke mine earè waxèd all deaf.
Stubborn I was, as is a lioness,
And of my tongue a very jangleress,
And walk I would as I had done befor

640 From house to house, although he had it sworn;

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1 616: "Given to me by the disposition of the stars at my birth."

2 625-6: "So long as he pleased me, I did not care about his poverty or social rank." ... he liked me almost certainly means "... he pleased me."

3 633: "He would allow none of my wishes."
For which he oftentimés woulde preach,
And me of oldé Roman gestês teach
How he, Simplicius Gallus, lefte his wife,
And her forsook for term of all his life,

Not but for open-headed he her saw
Looking out at his door upon a day. ¹
Another Roman told he me by name,
That, for his wife was at a summer game
Without his witting, he forsook her eke.

And then would he upon his Bible seek
That ilké proverb of Ecclesiast
Where he commandeth and forbiddeth fast:
`Man shall not suffer his wife go roll about.'
Then would he say right thus withouten doubt:

`Whoso that buildeth his house all of sallows,
And pricketh his blind horse over the fallows,
And suffereth his wife go seeken hallows,
Is worthy to be hanged on the gallows.'
But all for nought, I setté not an haw
Of his proverbs, nor of his oldé saw;
Nor I would not of him corrected be.
I hate them that my vices tellen me,
And so do more (God wot) of us than I.
This made him wood with me all utterly;

I woulde not forbear him in no case.²
Now will I say you sooth, by Saint Thomas,
Why that I rent out of his book a leaf,
For which he smote me, so that I was deaf.

His favorite reading was an anti-feminist book

¹ 645-6: "For nothing more than that he saw her one day looking out the door of the house with her head uncovered."

² 665: "I would not restrain myself for him under any circumstances."
He had a book, that gladly night and day
For his desport he would it read alway,
He clepèd it Valere, and Theophrast, ¹
At whiche book he laughed always full fast.
And eke there was sometime a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal that hightè Saint Jerome
That made a book against Jovinian,
In which book eke there was Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Eloise,
That was abessè not far from Paris,
And eke the Parables of Solomon,
Ovid's Art, and bookès many a one;
And allè these were bound in one volume.²
And every night and day was his custom
(When he had leisure and vacation
From other worldly occupation)
To readen in this book of wicked wives.
He knew of them more legendès and lives
Than be of goodé wivès in the Bible.
For trusteth well, it is an impossible,
That any clerk will speaken good of wives,
(But if it be of holy saintès' lives)
Nor of no other woman never the mo'.

Who writes these books?

Who painted the lion, tell me, who? ³

¹ 671: Two anti-feminist tracts: the Epistola Valerii of Walter Map, and the Liber de Nuptiis of Theophrastus known only from the large quotations from it that St.Jerome used in his argument against Jovinian.

² 681: A very odd anthology, with the Proverbs of Solomon and the work of the ascetic Jerome and Tertullian side by side with Ovid's pagan and sensual "Art of Love," and the sensual, sad but not pagan story of the love of Heloise and Abelard. Presumably the anthologist concentrated on those bits that were derogatory to women, especially married women.

³ 692: A man and a lion see a representation of a man overpowering a lion. The lion questions the truth and accuracy of this picture: clearly a man and not a lion had produced it, he said; if lions could paint or sculpt, the representation would be totally reversed.
By God, if women haddé written stories
As clerkês have within their oratories,

They would have writ of men more wickedness
Than all the mark of Adam may redress.
The children of Mercury and of Venus
Be in their working full contrarious.
Mercury loveth wisdom and sciéne,

And Venus loveth riot and dispense.
And for their diverse disposition
Each fails in other's exaltation.
As thus, God wot, Mercury is desolate
In Pisces, where Venus is exaltate,

And Venus fails where Mercury is raised.¹
Therefore no woman of no clerk is praised;
The clerk when he is old, and may naught do
Of Venus' workès worth his oldé shoe,
Then sits he down, and writes in his dotáge,

That women cannot keep their marriáge.

From Jankin's Book of Wicked Wives: Biblical examples

But now to purpose, why I toldè thee,
That I was beaten for a book, pardee.
Upon a night, Jankin that was our sire,
Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,

Of Eva first, that for her wickedness
Was all mankindé brought to wretchedness,²
For which that Jesus Christ himself was slain,

¹ 697-705: The fancy astrological detail makes the simple point that people of such opposite tastes and temperaments do not get on well together and do not present flattering pictures of each other. Professional celibates had a higher opinion of themselves than of married people, let alone of enthusiasts for sensuality like Alison of Bath. For an elaborate discussion of the Wife's horoscope see J.D. North, Chaucer's Universe, pp. 289 ff.

² 715-20: Eve, the first woman, ate the fruit of the Forbidden Tree in the Garden of Eden. In turn, she induced her husband Adam to eat of the fruit against God's commandment, and as a result they and all their descendants were excluded from Paradise. This human sin against God could only be atoned for by a God-man; hence the human race had to be redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ who was God become man.
That bought us with his hearté’s blood again.  
Lo here, express of woman may you find,

That woman was the loss of all mankind.

Then read he me how Samson lost his hairs:  
Judges XVI, 15-20

Sleeping, his lemmain cut them with her shears,
Through whiché treason lost he both his eyen.

That woman was the loss of all mankind.

Then read he me how Samson lost his hairs:  
Judges XVI, 15-20

Sleeping, his lemmain cut them with her shears,
Through whiché treason lost he both his eyen.

Classical examples

Then read he me, if that I shall not lien,

Of Hercules, and of his Dianire,
That caught him to set himself a-fire.  
Nothing forgot he the sorrow and the woe,
That Socrates had with his wivés two;
How Xantippé cast piss upon his head.

This silly man sat still, as he were dead.

He wiped his head; no moré durst he sayn,
But: `Ere that thunder stints there comes a rain.’

Of Pasiphaé, that was the queen of Crete,
For shrewédness him thought the talé sweet.

Fie, speak no more! It is a grisly thing

Of her horrible lust and her liking.

Of Clytemnestra for her lechery,

---

1 721-3:  Samson, a man of immense God-given strength, was seduced by his faithless lover, Dalilah, to tell her the secret of his strength which lay in his hair. While he was sleeping, the Philistines cut off his hair, blinded and enslaved him. He serves as another Biblical example of a strong man brought low by the wiles of a woman.

2 726:  Dianira, the wife of Hercules, gave him the poisoned shirt of Nessus thinking that it had magical properties which would renew his affections for her. It poisoned him instead, and he burned himself with hot coals.

3 728-32: A version of a story told by St Jerome in his anti-marriage argument in the tract Against Jovinian: Socrates laughed at his two wives quarreling over a man as ugly as he was. Then one of them turned on him with the result mentioned. Socrates is an example of even a wise man’s unhappy experience with women.

4 734-36: Pasiphae, wife of Minos of Crete, fell in love with the bull from the sea and hid herself in a cow constructed specially by Daedalus so that she could copulate with the bull. The result was the monster Minotaur.
That falsely made her husband for to die, \(^1\) (Agamemnon)
He read it with full good devotion.

740 He told me eke, for what occasion also / cause
Amphiorax at Thebës lost his life.
My husband had a legend of his wife
Eriphilë, that for an ouche of gold, brooch
Has privily unto the Greekës told

745 Where that her husband hid him in a place, "Thebaid", Bk VII
For which he had at Thebës sorry grace. bad fortune
Of Livia told he me, and of Lucy.
They bothë made their husbands for to die;
That one for love, that other was for hate.

750 Livia her husband on an evening late jealous
Empoisoned has, for that she was his foe.
Lucia likerous loved her husband so (So) that
That for he should always upon her think,
She gave him such a manner lovë-drink always

755 That he was dead ere it were by the morrow;
And thus algatës husbandës have sorrow.
    Then told he me, how that one Latumius
Complained unto his fellow Arius,
That in his garden growëd such a tree out of spite
The he saide how that his wivës three dear
Hangëd themselves for heartës déspitous. of that
    `O levë brother,` quod this Arius,
    `Give me a plant of thilkë blessëd tree,
And in my garden planted shall it be.'

760 On which he said how that his wivës three cover
    Of later date of wives had he read,
That some had slain their husbands in their bed,
And let their lecher dight them all the night
While that the corpse lay on the floor upright.
And some have driven nails into their brain

770 While that they slept, and thus they have them slain.
Some have them given poison in their drink.

\(^1\) 737-8: Clytemnestra, with her lover’s help, murdered her husband Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War. 740-6: Eryphelë was bribed to get her husband to join the war against Thebes in which he was killed.
He spoke more harm than heartè may bethink.

Anti-feminist proverbs

And therewithal he knew of more provérbs, moreover
Than in this world there growen grass or herbs.

775 'Bet is,' quod he, 'thine habitation It's better
Be with a lion, or a foul dragon, Ecclesiasticus 15: 16
Than with a woman using for to chide.' always scolding
'Bet is,' quod he, 'high in the roof abide, Better
Than with an angry wife down in the house. Prov. 21: 9

780 They be so wicked and contrarious
They hatè what their husbands loven, aye.' always
He said: 'A woman casts her shame away, her shift
When she casts off her smock; and furthermore, pretty / unless
A fair woman, but she be chaste also,

785 Is like a gold ring in a sowê's nose.' Proverbs 11: 22

Tired of his anti-feminist readings and quotations, I acted. A battle ensued.

Who could weenè, or who could suppose c. think or estimate
The woe that in my heart was, and the pine! resentment
And when I saw that he would never fine finish
To readen on this cursed book all night,

790 All suddenly three leavès have I plight plucked
Out of his book, right as he read, and eke and also
I with my fist so took him on the cheek punched
That in our fire he fell backward adown.
And up he starts as does a wood lion, jumped / angry

795 And with his fist he smote me on the head
That on the floor I lay as I were dead. so that
And when he saw how stillè that I lay, He was aghast, and would have fled his way,
He was aghast, and would have fled his way,
Till at the last out of my swoon I braid: I woke

800 'Oh, hast thou slain me, falsè thief ?' I said, Before I die
`And for my land thus hast thou murdered me?
Ere I be dead, yet will I kissen thee.'
And near he came, and kneelèd fair adown,
And said: 'Dear sister Alison,

805 As help me God I shall thee never smite;
What I have done it is thyself to wite,
Forgive it me, and that I thee beseech.'
And yet eftsoons I hit him on the cheek,
And said: 'Thief! thus much am I wreak.

810 Now will I die, I may no longer speak.'

My husband's surrender and our reconciliation

But at the last, with muché care and woe
We fell accorded by ourselfs two.
He gave me all the bridle in my hand
To have the governance of house and land,

815 And of his tongue, and of his hand also,
And made him burn his book anon right tho.
And when that I had gotten unto me
By mastery all the sovereignty,
And that he said: 'Mine owné trué wife,

820 Do as thee list the term of all thy life,
Keep thine honoúr, and keep eke mine estate' — ¹
After that day we never had debate.
God help me so, I was to him as kind
As any wife from Denmark unto Inde,

825 And also true, and so was he to me.
I pray to God that sits in majesty
So bless his soulé, for His mercy dear.
Now will I say my tale, if you will hear.

Interruption: A Quarrel between the Summoner and the Friar

The Friar laughed when he had heard all this.

¹ 821: This line seems to mean something like "Keep your liberty and also control of my property" but that stretches the meaning of honour. It might mean: "Guard your chastity (or good name) and respect my position as your husband."
"Now, Dame," quod he, "so have I joy or bliss,\textsuperscript{1}
This is a long preamble of a tale."
And when the Summoner heard the Friar gale,
"Lo," quod this Summoner, "Godë's armës two!
A friar will intermit him evermore.\textsuperscript{2}
\textit{Lo, goodë men, a fly and eke a frere}
Will fall in every dish and eke mattër.
What speak'st thou of preámbulation?
What! Amble or trot or peace or go sit down.
Thou lettest our disport in this mannër."
"Yea, wilt thou so, Sir Summoner?" quod the Frere.
"Now by my faith I shall, ere that I go,
Tell of a Summoner such a tale or two,
That all the folk shall laughen in this place."
"Now elsë, Friar, I will beshrew thy face,"\textsuperscript{3}
Quod this Summoner, "and I beshrewè me,
But if I tellë talës two or three
Of friars, ere I come to Sittingbourne,
That I shall make thy heartë for to mourn;
For well I wot thy patience is gone."\textsuperscript{4}
Our hostë criëd: "Peace, and that anon,"
And saidë: "Let the woman tell her tale.
You fare as folk that drunken be of ale.
Do, Dame, tell forth your tale, and that is best."
"All ready, sir," quod she, "right as you lest,
If I have licence of this worthy Frere."
"Yes, Dame," quod he, "tell forth, and I will hear."\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{The Wife of Bath's Tale}

\textit{Fairies in King Arthur's Britain}

\textsuperscript{1} 830: "Now, Ma'am, as sure as I hope to be saved ..." As in line 164 above, "Dame" is polite usage, not slang.

\textsuperscript{2} 856: The outbreak of hostilities between two pilgrims sets up two further tales which will fulfill these threats: the Friar later tells a rather good tale involving the iniquity of summoners. The Summoner, in turn, retorts with a rather rambling tale about a greedy friar.
In the olden days of King Arthûr,
Of which that Britons speaken great honoûr,
All was this land fulfillèd of faèrie;

The Elf-Queen, with her jolly company,
Dancèd full oft in many a greenè mead.

This was the old opinion as I read.
I speak of many hundred years ago,
But now can no man see no elfès mo',

For now the greatè charity and prayers
Of limiters and other holy freres, ¹
That searchèn every land and every stream,
As thick as motès in the sunnè-beam,
Blessing hallès, chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Cities, boroughs, castles, highè towers,
Thorps and barns, shippens and dairiès—
This maketh that there be no fairiès,
For there as wont to walken was an elf,
There walketh now the limiter himself

In undermeles and in mornings,
And says his matins and his holy things
As he goes in his limitation.
Women may go now safely up and down.
In every bush and under every tree,

There is no other incubus but he,
And he ne will not do them but dishonour. ³

Crime and punishment

And so befell it, that this king Arthûr

¹ 866: *limiters* were mendicant friars (*freres*) licensed to beg within a given limited district.

³ 881. A difficult line. It appears to mean "He will only dishonor them." Commentators get some sense out of that by pointing out that the "real" incubus, a night spirit who "came upon" women, not only "dishonored" them but impregnated them so that they bore little devils. MS Cam reads "he will do him(self) no dishonour" which makes sense in a different way, but lacks the bite of the preceding lines.
Had in his house a lusty bachelor,
That on a day came riding from the river
And happened, that, alone as she was born,
He saw a maiden walking him befor,
Of whichè maid anon, maugre her head,
By very force he raft her maidenhead,
For which oppressïon was such clamoûr
And such pursuit unto the king Arthúr
That damnèd was this knight for to be dead
By course of law, and should have lost his head,
(Peráventure such was the statute tho),
But that the queen and other ladies mo'
So longè prayédèn the king of grace
Till he his life him granted in the place,
And gave him to the queen, all at her will,
To choose whether she will him save or spill.

The Queen will pardon the offender on one condition

The queen thankèd the king with all her might;
And after this thus spoke she to the knight
When that she saw her time upon a day:
`Thou standest yet,' quod she, `in such array,
That of thy life yet hast thou no surety;
I grant thee life, if thou canst tellen me,
What thing is it that women most desiren.
Beware, and keep thy neckè-bone from iron.
And if thou canst not tell it me anon,
Yet will I give thee leavè for to gon
A twelvemonth and a day, to seek and lere
An answer suffissant in this mattér.
And surety will I have, ere that thou pace,
Thy body for to yielden in this place,'
Woe was the knight, and sorrowfully he sigheth.
But what? he may not do all as him liketh.
And at the last he chose him for to wend
And come again right at the yearè's end
With such answer as God would him purvey,
And takes his leave and wendeth forth his way.
He seeketh every house and every place,
Where as he hopeth for to finden grace,
To learn what thinge women loven most.

He gets various answers to the Queen’s question. The Wife comments on them

But he ne could arrivèn in no coast,
Where as he mightè find in this matèr
Two creatures according in fere.
Some saidè women loven best richesse,
Some said honoûr, some saidè jolliness,
Some rich array, some saidè lust a-bed,
And often times to be widow and wed.
Some saidè that our heartè is most eased
When that we be y-flattered and y-pleased.¹
He goes full nigh the sooth, I will not lie;
A man shall win us best with flattery;
And with attendance and with busyness
Be we y-limè bothè more and less.
And somè sayen that we loven best
For to be free, and do right as us lest,
And that no man reprove us of our vice
But say that we be wise and nothing nice.
For truly there is none of us all,
If any wight will claw us on the gall,
That we n’ill kick for that he says us sooth.²
Assay, and he shall find it that so doth.
For be we never so vicìous within,³
We will be holden wise and clean of sin.
And somè say that great delight have we
For to be holden stable and eke secreè,

¹ 925 ff: Note the characteristic slippage from women to we / our to I to us.
² 939-41: “There isn’t one of us who will not strike out at someone who touches our sore spot by telling the truth.”
³ 943: “No matter how vicious we are inside ...”
And in one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
And not bewrayen things that men us tell.
But that tale is not worth a rake-handle.

Pardee, we women canné nothing hele. By God / can hold nothing in
Witness on Midas; will you hear the tale?

A classical anecdote to illustrate the point that women cannot keep secrets

Ovid, amongst other thingës small, (the Latin poet)
Said Midas haddë under his long hairs
Growing upon his head two ass's ears;

For whichë vice he hid, as he best might,
Full subtely from every mannë's sight,
That, save his wife, there wist of it no mo'.
He loved her most, and trusted her also.
He prayëd her, that to no creâtúre

She should not tellen of his disfigûre.
She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win,
She would not do that villainy nor sin
To make her husband have so foul a name;
She would not tell it for her ownë shame.

But natheless her thoughtë that she died
That she so longë should a counsel hide;
Her thought it swelled so sore about her heart
That needëly some word her must astart; ¹
And since she durst not tell it to no man,

Down to a marshë fastë by she ran.
Till she came there, her heartë was afire,
And as a bittern bumbleth in the mire,
She laid her mouth unto the water down.
`Bewray me not, thou water, with thy sound,'

Quod she,´To thee I tell it, and no mo',
Mine husband has long ass's earës two.
Now is mine heart all whole, now it is out.
I might no longer keep it, out of doubt.'

Here may you see, though we a time abide,

¹ 968: "That of necessity some word would have to escape her."
980 Yet out it must, we can no counsel hide.
The remnant of the tale, if you will hear,
Read Ovid, and there you may it lere.  

Back to the tale: the knight sets out for home without a satisfactory answer

This knight, of which my tale is specially,
When that he saw he might not come thereby,
Discover it

985 (This is to say, what women loven most)
Within his breast full sorrowful was the ghost.
But home he goes, he mighte not sojourn,
Spirit
The day was come that homeward must he turn.
Delay
And on his way, it happened him to ride

990 In all this care, under a forest side,
Whereas he saw upon a dancé go
A forest's edge
Of ladies four-and-twenty and yet mo'.
Where
Toward the whiche dance he drew full yern,
Eagerly
In hopé that some wisdom he should learn;

995 But certainly, ere he came fully there,
Vanished was this dance, he wist not where;
Knew

He meets an ugly old woman

No creaturé saw he that bore life,
Save on the green he saw sitting a wife —
Older woman
A fouler wight there may no man devise.
Uglier creature / imagine

1000 Against this knight this old wife gan arise,
At the approach of
And said: `Sir Knight, here forth ne lies no way.'
Faith
Tell me what you seeken, by your fay.
Perhaps
Peraventure it may the better be;
Know a lot
These oldé folk can muchel thing,' quod she.

1005 'My levé mother,' quod this knight, `certaìn,
My dear

---

1 982: *Metamorphoses* XI, 174-193, where you would learn that it was his barber and not his wife who knew his secret and whispered it into a hole near the water out of which later grew reeds that continually whispered in the wind: "Midas has ass's ears."

2 1001: At the approach of this Knight the old woman rose and said: "There is no way through here."
I n'am but dead, but if that I can sayn
What thing it is that women most desire.
Could you me wiss, I would well quit your hire.'
`Plight me thy truth here in mine hand,' quod she,

`The nextè thing that I require of thee
Thou shalt it do if it lie in thy might,
And I will tell it you ere it be night.'
`Have here my truthè,' quod the knight, `I grant.'
`Then,' quod she, `I dare me well avaunt

Thy life is safe, for I will stand thereby
Upon my life the queen will say as I.
Let's see, which is the proudest of them all
That weareth on a kerchief or a caul,
That dare say nay of what I shall thee teach.

Let us go forth withouten longer speech.'

The old woman gives him the answer to the Queen’s question,
and they go to the royal court together

Then rownèd she a 'pistle in his ear, whispered a message
And bade him to be glad, and have no fear.
When they be comen to the court, this knight
Said he had held his day as he had hight, kept / promised
And ready was his answer as he said.

Full many a noble wife and many a maid
And many a widow (for that they be wise),
The queen herself sitting as justice,
Assembled be this answer for to hear,

And afterward this knight was bid appear.
To every wight commanded was silence, every person
And that the knight should tell in audience
What thing that worldly women loven best.

---

1 1006: "I am as good as dead unless I can say."  
2 1008: "If you could inform me (me wiss), I would reward (quit) you well for your trouble."  
3 1021: "'pistle" is short for "epistle" from L. "epistola" = letter, hence a message of some kind.
This knight ne stood not still, as does a beast,
1035 But to this question anon answered promptly
With manly voice, that all the court it heard: so that
`My liegë lady, generally,' quod he,
Women desiren to have sovereignty My lady Queen
As well over their husband as their love,
1040 And for to be in mastery him above.
This is your most desire, though you me kill. greatest
Do as you list, I am here at your will.' wish
In all the court ne was there wife nor maid
Nor widow, that contráried what he said, contradicted what
1045 But said that he was worthy have his life.

The old woman demands her reward

And with that word up started that old wife
Which that the knight saw sitting on the green. Please
`Mercy,' quod she, `my sovereign lady queen,
Ere that your court depart, as do me right. Before
1050 I taughté this answer unto the knight,
For which he plighted me his truthé there, pledged his word
The firsté thing I would of him require,
He would it do, if it lay in his might.
Before the court then pray I thee, Sir Knight,'

1055 Quod she, `that thou me take unto thy wife,
For well thou wost, that I have kept thy life. know / saved
If I say false, say nay, upon thy fay.' on your faith (word)
This knight answered: `Alas and welaway!
I wot right well that such was my behest. I know / promise
1060 For Godë's love, as choose a new request.
Take all my goods, and let my body go.' a curse on
`Nay, then,' quod she, `I shrew us bothé two,
For though that I be foul and old and poor,
I n'ould for all the metal nor the ore,
1065 That under earth is grave, or lies above, buried
But if thy wife I were and eke thy love.' ¹  
`My love?' quod he, `nay, my damnaïon! 
Alas! that any of my naïon  
Should e'er so foulé disparáged be.' ²

Unwillingly and ungraciously the knight keeps his promise to the old woman

1070  But all for nought; the end is this, that he  
Constrainéd was; he needês must her wed,  
And taketh this old wife, and goes to bed.  
Now, wouldê some men say perãventure,  
That for my negligence I do no cure  
To tellyen you the joy and all th'array  
That at the feastê was that ilkê day.  
To which thing shortly answeren I shall:  
I say there was no joy nor feast at all;  
There n'as but heaviness and muchel sorrow:  
For privily he wedded her a-morrow;  
And all day after hid him as an owl,  
So woe was him, his wifê looked so foul.  
Great was the woe the knight had in his thought  
When he was with his wife a-bed y-brought;

1085  He walloweth, and he turneth to and fro.  
This oldê wife lay smiling evermo',  
And said: `O dearê husband, ben'citee,  
Fares every knight thus with his wife as ye?’ ³  
Is this the law of king Arthourê’s house?

1090  Is every knight of his thus daungerous?  
I am your ownê love, and eke your wife,  
I am she that savèd hath your life.

¹ 1064-66: "I would not (be satisfied) with all the (precious) metal and ore below ground and above unless I became your wife and your beloved." That is, "I want more than anything else to be your wife."

² 1069: Disparaged literally meant being forced to marry someone below one's rank.

³ 1088-90: Fares ...daungerous: “Does every knight treat his wife this way? Is this some (peculiar) law in King Arthur’s court? Is every knight as cold (as you)?”
And certès yet did I you never unright.
Why fare you thus with me this firstè night?

1095 You faren like a man had lost his wit.
What is my guilt? ¹ For God's love tell me it,
And it shall be amended, if I may.'
`Amended!' quod this knight, `alas! nay, nay.
It will not be amended never mo'.

1100 Thou art so loathly, and so old also,
And thereto comen of so low a kind,
That little wonder is though I wallow and wind;
So woulde God mine hearté wouldè burst.'
`Is this,' quod she, `the cause of your unrest?'

1105 `Yea, certainly,' quod he, `no wonder is.'
`Now, Sir,' quod she, `I could amend all this,
If that me list, ere it were dayès three,
So well you mightè bear you unto me.'²

The old wife answers the first objection to her: that she is not “gently” born

But for you speaken of such gentilesse,

1110 As is descended out of old richesse,
That therefore shouldè you be gentlemen;³
Such arrogancè is not worth a hen.
Look who that is most virtuous alway
Privy and apert, and most intendeth aye ⁴

1115 To do the gentle deedès that he can,

¹ 1096: “What have I done wrong?”

² 1108: "If you were polite to me" or "So that you would be affectionate to me."

³ 1111: The words "gentilesse," "gentle," "gentleman," "gentry" recur persistently in the passage that follows. The young knight gives them the aristocratic meaning: "gentle" birth is a matter of "genes." The wife insists on the moral meaning: no one is born "gentle," but must become so by his own efforts and God’s grace. Likewise, "villains" and "churls," the opposites of "gentlemen," are not born but made -- by their own vices. I have retained the original form "gentilesse" rather than "gentleness" for what I hope is greater clarity of meaning.

⁴ 1113-15: "Note who is most virtuous always, privately and publicly (privy and apert) and who always tries (intendeth aye) to do . . ."
Take him for the greatest gentleman.  
Christ wills we claim of Him our gentilesse, 
Not of our elders for their old richesse.  
For though they gave us all their heritáge,
For which we claim to be of high paráge,
Yet may they not bequeathen, for no thing, 
To none of us, their virtuous living, 
That made them gentlemen y-callèd be, 
And bade us follow them in such degree.  

**Dante and others on heredity and gentilesse**

1125 Well can the wisè poet of Floréncé  
That highté Dante speak of this senténce.  
Lo, in such manner rhyme is Dante's tale:
`Full seld uprises by his branches small
Prowess of man, for God of his goodness
Wills that of Him we claim our gentilesse";  
For of our elders may we nothing claim
But temporal thing, that may man hurt and maim.
Eke every wight wot this as well as I.
If gentilesse were planted naturally
Unto a certain lineage down the line,
Privy and apert then would they never fine
To do of gentilesse the fair office; 
They mighten do no villainy nor vice.
Take fire, and bear it in the darkest house

---

1 1121-4: *Yet may ... degree:* "There is no way they can leave to us the virtuous way of life which caused them to be called gentlemen and to urge us to follow in the same path." The triple negative not, no, none is perfectly good grammar for Chaucer's day.

2 1128-30: *Full . . . man:* "Man's moral integrity seldom goes into the branches (descendants) from the main stock," i.e. moral quality is not inherited. *Prowess = Dante's "probity." Branches small are the heirs of "gentle" stock. God wants us to ascribe our "gentility" to His grace.

3 1134 - 37: *If . . . office:* "If gentleness were a result of being born into a certain family, then both publicly (apert) and privately (privy) the members of that family (lineage) would never cease (fine) from doing the good that belongs to (the office of) 'gentleness.'"
WIFE OF BATH’S TALE

Betwixt this and the Mount of Caucasus,
And let men shut the doorès, and go thence—
Yet will the fire as fairè lie and burn
As twenty thousand men might it behold;
Its office natural aye will it hold,¹
Up peril of my life, till that it die.
Here may you see well, how that gentery
Is not annexèd to possession,
Since folk ne do their operation
Always as does the fire, lo, in its kind.

For God it wot, men may well often find
A lord's son do shame and villainy.
And he that will have price of his gentry,
For he was born of a gentle house,
And had his elders noble and virtuous,
And n'ill himself do no gentle deeds,
Nor follow his gentle ancestor, that dead is —
He is not gentle, be he duke or earl,
For villain's sinful deed s make a churl.
Thy gentilessè is but renomee
Of thine ancestors, for their high bounty,
Which is a strangè thing to thy person,
For gentilessè comes from God alone.²
Then comes our very gentilesse of grace;
It was no thing bequeathed us with our place.

Thinketh how noble, as says Valerius,
Was thilkè Tullius Hostilius
That out of poverte rose to high noblesse.
Read Seneca, and readeth eke Boece,³

¹ 1144: "It will always (aye) function according to its nature."

² 1162: "Gentleness" in line 1162 has her meaning--moral quality. In 1159 it has his meaning--"gentle" birth.

³ 1168: Seneca: pagan Roman philosopher (d. 65 a.d.). Boethius: Roman philosopher (perhaps Christian, d. 525 a.d.) whose Consolations of Philosophy was highly regarded in the Middle Ages. Having the fairytale wife cite these "authorities" is decidedly odd. Here and in the following lines I have retained the original form poverte, which has two syllables and seems to be able to stress either; its modern form poverty inconveniently has three, with stress invariably on
There shall you see express, that no dread is, without doubt

That he is gentle that does gentle deedés.

And therefore, leve husband, I thus conclude, dear husband

All were it that mine ancestors were rude, Although / "lowborn"

Yet may the highé God, and so hope I, 

Grant me grace to liven virtuously.

Then am I gentle when that I begin 
give up

To liven virtuously and waiven sin.

The virtues of poverty

And there as you of poverte me repreeve,¹

The highé God, in whom that we believe,

In willful poverte chose to live His life.

And certês every man, maiden, or wife

May understand that Jesus, heaven's king,

Ne would not choose a vicious living.

Glad poverte is an honest thing certáin.

This will Senec' and other clerkês sayn. Seneca & other writers

Whoso that holds him paid of his povérte,

I hold him rich, all had he not a shirt.²

He that covets is a poorë wight, creature

For he would have what is not in his might.

But he that naught has, nor coveteth to have,

Is rich, although men hold him but a knave. servant

Very povérite singeth properly.³

Juvenal says of poverté merrily:

`The pooré man when he goes by the way, along the road

the first.

¹ 1177 ff: "And whereas you reprove me for my poverty, [I answer that] the high God in whom we believe, deliberately chose to live his life in poverty." She is referring, of course, to Jesus Christ. Here and in some other lines I have retained the original form pover(e) which has two syllables and seems to be able to stress either; its modern form poverty inconveniently has three, with stress invariably on the first.

² 1185-6: "Whoever is contented in his poverty, him I consider rich even if he does not possess a shirt."

³ 1191: "True (i.e. contented) poverty sings by its very nature."
Before the thievès he may sing and play.'

Povérte is hateful good; and, as I guess,
A full great bringer out of busyness;
A great amender eke of sapience
To him that taketh it in patience.
Povérte's a thing, although it seem alenge,¹
Possession that no wight will challenge.
Povérte full ofté, when a man is low,
Maketh himself and eke his God to know.
Povérte's a spectacle, as thinketh me,²
Through which he may his very friendès see.
And, therefore, Sir, since that I not you grieve,
Of my povérte no morè me repreve.

Her age and ugliness

Now, Sir, of eld, that you repreven me:
And certès, Sir, though no authority
Were in no book, you gentles of honoúr
Say that men should an old wight do favoúr
And clepe him "father", for your gentilesse;
And authors shall I finde, as I guess.³
Now, where you say that I am foul and old,
Then dread you not to be a cuckold.
For filth and eldè, also may I thee,
Be greatè wardens upon chastity.⁴
But natheless, since I know your delight,

¹ 1199: "Alenge," an uncommon word in Chaucer, is generally glossed "miserable" or "wearisome," which hardly fits this couplet.

² 1203: "Spectacle" refers to eye glasses or a magnifying glass, or less likely, a mirror.

³ 1208 - 1212: "Even if no respected authors had said so, you ‘gentry’ yourselves say that, out of courtesy, one should respect an old man and call him ‘Father.’ And I am sure I can find authors who say so.”

⁴ 1215-16: “Ugliness and age, I assure you, are great preservers of chastity.” In also may I thee (as I hope to prosper), the last word, thee, is the verb to prosper.
I shall fulfill your worldly appetite.

She offers him a choice between two things

Choose now,' quod she, `one of these thingês tway:

To have me foul and old till that I die,
And be to you a true and humble wife,
And never you displease in all my life;
Or elsê you will have me young and fair,
And take your aventure of the repair

That shall be to your house because of me,
(Or in some other place it may well be).\(^1\)
Now choose yourself whether that you liketh.
This knight aviseth him, and sorê sigheth,
But at the last he said in this manër:

He lets her choose

`My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
I put me in your wisê governance.
Choose yourself which may be most pleasânce
And most honoîr to you and me also;
I do no force the whether of the two.\(^2\)

For as you liketh, it sufficeth me.'
`Then have I got of you mastery,' quod she,
`Since I may choose and govern as me lest?'
`Yea, certês, wife,' quod he, `I hold it best.'
`Kiss me,' quod she, `we be no longer wroth,

For by my truth I will be to you both,
This is to say, yea, bothê fair and good.
I pray to God that I may starven wood,
But I to you be all so good and true

---

\(^1\) 1224-26: "And take your chances with the large number of visitors (repair) that will come to our house because of me -- or perhaps to someplace else."

The alternatives that the wife poses to her husband constitute a demande d'amour, a favorite game of medieval writers, and of aristocratic medieval women, according to Andreas Capellanus. The Knight and the Franklin also propose demandes in their tales.

\(^2\) 1234: "I do not care which of the two."
As ever was wife, since that the world was new;
And but I be to-morrow as fair to seen
As any lady, empress or queen,
That is betwixt the East and eke the West,
Do with my life and death right as you lest.
Cast up the curtain, look how that it is.'

The happy result

And when the knight saw verily all this,
That she so fair was, and so young thereto,
For joy he hent her in his armés two:
His hearté bathéd in a bath of bliss,
A thousand times a-row he gan her kiss;
And she obeyéd him in every thing
That mighté do him pleasance or liking.
And thus they live unto their livés end
In perfect joy.

A prayer of sorts

And Jesus Christ us send
Husbands meeké, young, and fresh a-bed,
And grace to overbide them that we wed.
And eke I prayé Jesus short their lives
That will not be governéd by their wives.
And old and angry niggards of dispense,
God send them soon a very pestilence.

(May) Christ send us
to outlive
also / shorten
tight spenders
veritable plague