

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 unforgettably 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

WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

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.

CANTERBURY TALES

The Portrait, Prologue and Tale of the Wife of Bath

The portrait of the Wife from the General Prologue

*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 besidè Bath	<i>near</i>
But she was somedeal deaf, and that was scath.	<i>somewhat / a pity</i>
Her coverchiefs full finè were of ground;	<i>finely woven</i>
I durstè swear they weighèden ten pound	<i>dare</i>
That on a Sunday were upon her head.	
Her hosen weren of fine scarlet red	<i>stockings</i>
Full straight y-tied, and shoes full moist and new.	<i>supple</i>
Bold was her face and fair and red of hue.	<i>color</i>
She was a worthy woman all her life.	
460 Husbands at churchè door she had had five, ¹	
Withouten other company in youth,	<i>Not counting</i>
But thereof needeth not to speak as nouth.	<i>now</i>

¹ 460: *at churchè door*: Weddings took place in the church porch, followed by Mass inside.

	And thrice had she been at Jerusalem.	<i>3 times</i>
	She had passèd many a strangè stream.	<i>foreign</i>
	At Romè she had been and at Boulogne,	
	In Galicia at St James and at Cologne.	<i>[famous shrines]</i>
	She couldè much of wandering by the way. ¹	<i>knew much</i>
	Gat-toothèd was she, soothly for to say.	<i>Gap-toothed / truly</i>
	Upon an ambler easily she sat	<i>slow horse</i>
470	Y-wimpled well, ² and on her head a hat	
	As broad as is a buckler or a targe,	<i>kinds of shield</i>
	A foot mantle about her hippes large,	<i>outer skirt</i>
	And on her feet a pair of spurs sharp.	
	In fellowship well could she laugh and carp.	<i>joke</i>
	Of remedies of love she knew perchance	<i>by experience</i>
	For she could of that art the oldè dance. ³	<i>knew</i>

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	<i>authors.</i>
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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
 5 (Thankèd be God that is etern alive)
 Husbands at churchè 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
 10 That since that Christ ne went never but once
 To wedding, in the Cane of Galilee, John II, 1-10
 That by the same example taught he me,
 That I ne shouldè wedded be but once.³
 Lo, hark eke which a sharp word for the nonce⁴
 15 Beside a well Jesus, God and man,
 Spoke in reproof of the Samaritan: John IV, 6-26
 `Thou hast had fivè husbandès,' quod he; said he
 `And that ilkè man which that now hath thee, that very man
 Is not thy husband.' Thus he said certain;
 20 What that he meant thereby, I cannot sayn.
 But that I ask why that the fifthè 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 cononical 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 reproofed 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.

- Yet heard I never tellen in mine age *my life*
- 25 Upon this number definition;
 Men may divine and glossen up and down. *speculate & comment*
 But well I wot, express without a lie, *I know / definitely*
 God bade us for to wax and multiply; *told us to increase*
 That gentle text can I well understand.
- 30 Eke well I wot he said that my husband *Also I know well*
 Should let father and mother, and take to me; *leave (Matt. xix, 5.)*
 But of no number mention made he,
 Of bigamy or of octogamy;¹ *2 or 8 marriages*
 Why should men then speak of it villainy? *speak badly*

Holy men in the Bible had more wives than one

- 35 Lo, here the wisè king Daun Solomon;
 I trowè he had wivès many a one. *I believe*
 (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 wivès!²
- 40 No man hath such, that in this world alive is.
 God wot, this noble king, as to my wit, *God knows / I'll wager*
 The firstè night had many a merry fit *bout*
 With each of them, so well was him alive. *so virile was he (?)*
 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.

44a Of which I have pickèd out the best
 Both of their nether purse and of their chest. *=lower purse = scrotum*
 Diversè schoolès maken perfect clerks *students*
 And diverse practices in sundry works
 Maken the workman perfect sikerly.

- 45 Welcome the sixthé when that ever he shall, *shall (come along)*
 For since I will not keep me chaste in all *totally celibate*
 When my husband is from the worldé gone,
 Some Christian man shall weddè me anon.
 For then, the apostle says that I am free *Paul (I Cor VII, 9)*
- 50 To wed, on Godè's half, where it liketh me. *w. God's consent / pleases me*
 He says that to be wedded is no sin;
 Better is to be wedded than to brinne. *burn (I, Cor VII)*
 What recketh me though folk say villainy *What care I*
 Of shrewèd Lamech and his bigamy? ¹ *(Gen.IV, 19)*
- 55 I wot well Abraham was a holy man, *I know*
 And Jacob eke, as far as ever I can, *also / I know*
 And each of them had wivès more than two,
 And many another holy man also.

*Virginity is good, but is nowhere **demandèd** by God*

- Where can you see in any manner age
 60 That highè God defended marriage *forbade*
 By express word? I pray you telleth me. *tell me*
 Or where commanded he virginity?
 I wot as well as you (it is no dread) *I know / no question*
 The apostle, when he speaks of maidenhead, *St. Paul / virginity*
- 65 He said that precept thereof had he none. *command*
 Men may *counsel* a woman to be one, *advise / be single*
 But counselling is no commandèment;
 He put it in our ownè judgèment. *I Cor VII, 25*
- 70 For haddè God commanded maidenhead,
 Then had he damnèd wedding with the deed. *condemned*
 And certès, if there were no seed y-sow, *certainly / sown*
 Virginity then whereof should it grow?
 Paul durstè not commanden at the least *dared*

44f Of fivè husbands scholeying am I.

I am the student

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.	<i>no command</i>
75	The dart is set up for virginity, Catch whoso may, who runneth best let's see.	<i>The first prize</i>
	But this word is not take of every wight, But there as God will give it of His might.	<i>not meant / person</i> <i>only where / power</i>
	I wot well that the apostle was a maid,	<i>I know / virgin</i>
80	But natheless, though that he wrote or said He would that every wight were such as he, All n'is but <i>counsel</i> to virginity.	<i>I Cor. VII, 7</i> <i>wished t. e. person</i> <i>is advice only</i>
	And for to be a wife he gave me leave Of indulgence, ¹ so n'is it no reprove	<i>it is no reproof</i>
85	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;	<i>my mate</i> <i>accusation</i> <i>Even if it is good...</i> <i>to join fire & flax</i>
90	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>In short</i> <i>out of</i> <i>I call it / unless</i>
95	I grant it well, I have of none envy, ² Though maidenhead preferè bigamy; It likes them to be clean in body and ghost. Of mine estate ne will I make no boast.	<i>is preferred over</i> <i>It pleases / b. & soul</i> <i>my state (as wife)</i>

Virginity is not for everyone

	For well you know, a lord in his household	
100	Ne has not every vessel all of gold; Some be of tree and do their lord service.	<i>of wood</i>
	God clepeth folk to him in sundry wise,	<i>G. calls / different</i>

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. *everyone / special
pleases him to choose*
- 105 Virginitie is great perfection,
 And continence eke with devotion. *And sexual restraint*
 But Christ, that of perfection is well, *is the source*
 Bade not every wight he should go sell *every person*
 All that he had and give it to the poor,
- 110 And in such wise follow him and his foot;
 He spoke to them that will live perfectly, *fashion / steps*
 And, lordings, (by your leave) that am not I. *wish to*
 I will bestow the flower of all mine age
 In the actès and the fruit of marriage.
- If virginity were for everyone, why do we all have sexual organs?*
- 115 Tell me also, to what conclusion *for w. purpose*
 Were members made of generation, *sexual organs made*
 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, *Explain (away)*
- 120 That they were made for purgation
 Of urine, and our bothè thingès small ²
 Was eke to know a female from a male,
 And for no other causè. Say you no?
 The experience wot well it is not so. *knows*
- 125 So that the clerkès be not with me wroth, *clerics / angry*
 I say this, that they makèd be for both,
 This is to say, for office and for ease *duty & pleasure*
 Of engendrure, where we not God displease. *procreation*
 Why should men elsè in their bookès set
- 130 That man shall yield unto his wife her debt?
 Now wherewith should he make his payèment,

¹117: "And made (y-wrought) by so perfectly wise a creator (wright)".

² 121: "Both out small things". Whatever organs, male and female, the wife is thinking of, "small" is the surprising word.

If he ne used his silly instrument? ¹ *his blessed (?)*
 Then were they made upon a creäture
 To purgè urine, and eke for engendrure. *also f. procreation*

Marriage is not for everyone either

135 But I say not that every wight is hold, *person is required*
 That has such harness as I to you told, *equipment*
 To go and usen them in engendrure;
 Then should men take of chastity no cure. *respect*
 Christ was a maid, and shapen as a man, *virgin, & formed*
 140 And many a saint, since that this world began,
 Yet lived they ever in perfect chastity.
 I n'll envy no virginity. ² *will not*
 Let them be bread of purèd wheatè seed, *refined*
 And let us wivès hotèn barley bread. *be called*

But marriage is for Alison

145 And yet with barley bread, Mark tellè can, *St. M. says*
 Our Lord Jesus refreshèd many a man. ³
 In such estate as God has clepèd us *career / has called*
 I'll persevere; I am not precïous. *not fastidious, snobbish*
 In wifhood will I use mine instrument
 150 As freely as my Maker has it sent.
 If I be daungerous God give me sorrow. *distant, frigid*
 My husband shall it have both eve and morrow, *night and morning*
 When that him list come forth and pay his debt. *it pleases him*
 A husband will I have, I will not let, *I won't be stopped*

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, *Who / my slave*
 And have his tribulation withall *suffering*
 Upon his flesh while that I am his wife.
 I have the power during all my life
 Upon his proper body, and not he; *his own (Fr. "propre")*
 160 Right thus the apostle told it unto me, *I Cor VII, 4*
 And bade our husbands for to love us well. *& Ephes V, 25*
 All this sentence me liketh every deal." *t. teaching pleases me*

An interruption from an unexpected quarter

- Up starts the Pardoner, and that anon; *suddenly*
 "Now, Dame," quod he, "by God and by Saint John, *Now, ma'am*
 165 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. *Wait*
 170 Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tun *barrel*
 Ere that I go, shall savor worse than ale. *(which) will taste*
 And when that I have told thee forth my tale
 Of tribulation in marriage,
 Of which I am expert in all mine age,
 175 (This is to say, myself has been the whip)
 Then may'st thou choosè whether thou wilt sip
 Of thilkè tunnè, that I shall abroach. *that cask / tap*
 Beware of it, ere thou too nigh approach, *too near*
 For I shall tell examples more than ten.
 180 Whoso that n'ill beware by other men *Whoever will not*
 By him shall other men corrected be.
 These samè wordès writeth Ptolemy; *P. the astronomer*
 Read in his Almagest, and take it there." *A = a book on astronomy*
 "Dame, I would pray you, if your will it were," *Ma'am*
 185 Said this Pardoner, "as you began,

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." *know-how*

"Don't take too seriously what I am going to say," she advises

"Gladly," quod she, "since that it may you like. *may please you*
But that I pray to all this company,
190 If that I speak after my fantasy, *fancy*
As taketh not a-grief of what I say, *offence*
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 *Barely keep t. (sexual) contract*
In which that they were bounden unto me.
200 You wot well what I mean of this, pardee. *You know / by God*
As God me help, I laughè when that I think,
How piteously a-night I made them swink. *work*

How to control husbands: with relentless nagging

But by my fay, I told of it no store: *faith, I didn't care*
They had me given their land and their treasúre,
205 Me needed not do longer diligence ¹
To win their love, or do them reverence. *respect*
They lovèd me so well, by God above,
That I ne told no dainty of their love. *I didn't value*
A wisè woman will busy her ever in one *e. in one = always*
210 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 *take care*
But it were for my profit, or mine ease? *Unless it were*
215 I set them so a-workè, by my fay, *faith*

¹ 205. "I no longer needed to take pains" (lit. "It was no longer necessary to me").

- That many a night they sungen `Welaway!' *`Alas'*
 The bacon was not fetched for them, I trow, *I guess*
 That some men have in Essex at Dunmow.¹
 I governed them so well after my law, *according to*
 220 That each of them full blissful was and faw *glad*
 To bringè me gay thingès from the fair. *pretty*
 They were full glad when I spoke to them fair, *nicely*
 For God it wot, I chid them spitously. *G. knows I nagged t. mercilessly*
 Now hearken how I bore me properly. *behaved / usually?*
 225 You wisè wivès that can understand,
 Thus shall you speak and bear them wrong on hand, *deceive them*
 For half so boldèly can there no man
 Swear and lie as a woman can.
 (I say not this by wivès that be wise,
 230 But if it be when they them misadvise). *unless they misbehave*
 A wisè wife, if that she can her good, *if she knows*
 Shall bearen him on hand the chough is wood, *convince him t. crow is mad*
 And takè witness of her ownè maid
 Of her assent.² But hearken how I said:
 235 `Sir oldè kaynard, is this thine array?³ *You old fool*
 Why is my neighèbourè's wife so gay? *so well dressed*
 She is honoured overall there she goes. *everywhere*
 I sit at home; I have no thrifty clothes. *pretty*
 What dost thou at my neigèhbourè's house?
 240 Is she so fair? Art thou so amorous?
 What rown you with our maid, ben'dicitee? *whisper*
 Sir oldè lecher, let thy japès be. *games*
 And if I have a gossip or a friend *a confidant*
 Withouten guilt, thou chidest as a fiend *you complain l. a devil*

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."

245 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 poorè woman for costáge. *expense*
 250 And if that she be rich, of high paráge, *birth*
 Then sayst thou that it is a tormentry
 To suffer her pride and her meláncholy.
 And if that she be fair (Thou very knave!) *if she's pretty, you wretch*
 Thou sayst that every holor will her have; *lecher*
 255 She may no while in chastity abide
 That is assailèd upon each a side. *every side*
 Thou sayst some folk desire us for riches,¹ *riches*
 Some for our shape and some for our fairness, *beauty*
 And some for she can either sing or dance,
 260 And some for gentleness and dalliance, *playfulness*
 Some for their handès and their armès small.
 Thus goes all to the devil, by thy tale. *account*
 Thou sayst men may not keep a castle wall
 It may so long assailèd be overall. *(If) it*
 265 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
 Till she may findè some man her to cheap. *to buy her*
 Ne none so gray goose goes there in the lake,
 270 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.² *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,
 275 Nor no man that intendeth unto heaven. *who hopes to go*
 With wildè thunder dint and fiery leven *thunderbolt & f. lightning*
 May thy welkèd neckè be tobroke! *wrinkled n. be broken*
 Thou sayst that dripping houses and eke smoke *leaky*
 And chiding wivès maken men to flee *nagging*
 280 Out of their ownè house. Ah, ben'citee! *bless us!*
 What aileth such an old man for to chide!
 Thou sayst we wivès will our vices hide
 Till we be fast, and then we will them show. *married*
 Well may that be the proverb of a shrew. *wretch*
 285 Thou sayst that oxen, asses, horses, hounds,
 They be assayèd at diverse stounds. *tested at various times*
 Basins, lavers, ere that men them buy, *bowls*
 Spoonès and stools, and all such husbandry, *utensils*
 And so be pots, clothès, and array; *& equipment*
 290 But folk of wivès maken no assay, *no test*
 Till they be wedded. (Oldè dotard shrew!) *senile old fool!*
 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, *Unless*
 295 And but thou pore always upon my face, *look*
 And clepe me fairè dame in every place, *call / lady*
 And but thou make a feast on thilkè day *(birthday)*
 That I was born, and make me fresh and gay, *buy me new clothes*
 And but thou do unto my nurse honoúr,
 300 And to my chamberer within my bower, *my lady's maid*
 And to my father's folk, and mine allies. *my relatives*
 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,
 305 And for he squireth me both up and down, *because he*

- 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 keyès 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 shouldest say: 'Fair wife, go where thee lest; *you please*
 Take your disport; I will not 'lieve no talès; *Have fun / believe*
 320 I know you for a truè wife, Dame Alice.'
 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:
 'Of allè men his wisdom is the highest,
 That recketh not who has the world in hand.' *cares not who rules*
 By this provérb thou shalt well understand:
 Have thou enough, what thar thee reck or care *What need you?*
 330 How merrily that other folkès fare? ²
 For certès, oldè dotard, by your leave, *certainly, old fool*
 You shall have quaintè 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 precïous array,
That it is peril of our chastity.

attractive

ornaments

340 And yet—With sorrow!—thou must enforcè thee ¹
And sayst these words in the apostle's name:

`In habit made with chastity and shame

clothing / modesty

You women shall apparel you,' quod he,

`And not in tressèd hair, and gay perree,

jewelry

345 As pearls, nor with gold, nor clothès rich.'

After thy text, nor after thy rubric

By your book / rule

I will not work as muchel as a gnat.

Thou saigest this, that I was like a cat;

For whoso that would singe a cat's skin,

If anyone

350 Then would the cat well dwellen in its inn;

home

And if the cat's skin be sleek and gay,

She will not dwell in housè half a day,

But forth she will ere any day be dawed,

dawned

To show her skin and go a caterwawed.

caterwauling

355 This is to say, if I be gay, sir shrew,

well dressed

I will run out, my borel for to show.

clothing

Sir oldè fool, what helpeth thee to spy?

Though thou pray Argus with his hundred eyes

To be my wardécors, as he can best,

bodyguard

360 In faith he shall not keep me but me lest;

unless I want

I nagged him about his (imaginary) nagging

Yet could I make his beard, so may I thee.²

Thou saigest eke, that there be thingès three,

said also

The which things greatly trouble all this earth,

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 wightè may endure the fourth.
 365 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 réſemblances ¹
 That you may liken your parables to
 370 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
 375 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.'

no person
O dear / shorten

Is counted
Are there no o. kinds?

poor wife / those

destroy

An admission

- Lordings, right thus, as you have underſtand,
 380 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. ²
 O Lord, the pain I did them and the woe
 385 Full guiltèſſ, by Godè's ſweetè pine!
 For as a horſe, I couldè bite and whine;
 I couldè 'plain and I was in the guilt,
 Or elſè often time I had been ſpilt.
 Whoſo that firſt to millè comes, firſt grint.
 390 I 'plainèd firſt, ſo was our war y-stint. ³

boldly deceived

suffering

complain even when
ruined

The one / grinds
over

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.

They were full glad to excusen them full blive ¹ *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 unnethè stand, *sickness / barely*
 395 Yet tickled I his heartè for that he
 Wend that I had of him so great charity.² *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.
 400 For all such wit is given us in our birth:
 Deceit, weeping, spinning, God has give
 To women kindly, while that they may live. *by nature*
 And thus of one thing I avauntè me, *I boast*
 At th'end I had the better in each degree, *in every way*
 405 By sleight or force or by some manner thing, *By trickery*
 As by continual murmur or grouching; *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,
 410 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, *desire*
 And yet in bacon had I never delight. *cured (old) meat*
 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. *table*
 For by my truth I quit them word for word.
 As help me very God omnipotent,
 Though I right now should make my testament, *my will*
 425 I owe them not a word that it n'is quit. *isn't repaid*
 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, *angry*
 430 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, *my dear, look*
 How meekly looketh Willikins our sheep! *W = husband*
 Come near, my spouse, and let me ba thy cheek. *kiss*
 You should be allè patient and meek,
 435 And have a sweetè spicèd conscience. *easy, forgiving*
 Since you so preach of Job's patience,
 Suffereth always, since you so well can preach, *Put up with things*
 And but you do, certain we shall you teach *unless you do*
 That it is fair to have a wife in peace. *is good*
 440 One of us two must bowè doubtèless,
 And since a man is morè reasonable
 Than woman is, you mustè be sufferable. *tolerant, forbearing*
 What aileth you to grouchè thus and groan? *grumble*

- Is it for you would have my quaint alone? ¹ *my body for yourself*
 445 Why, take it all. Lo, have it every deal. *every bit*
 Peter, I shrew you, but you love it well.² *By St. Peter*
 For if I wouldè sell my *belle chose*, *my body*
 I couldè walk as fresh as is a rose,
 But I will keep it for your ownè tooth. *just for you*
 450 You be to blame, by God, I say you sooth.³ *truth*
 Such manner wordès haddè we in hand. *together*

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, *lover*
 455 And I was young and full of ragery, *passion*
 Stubborn and strong, and jolly as a pie. *magpie*
 How I could dancè to a harpè small!
 And sing, y-wis, as any nightingale *indeed*
 When I had drunk a draught of sweetè wine.
 460 Metellius, the foulè churl, the swine,
 That with a staff bereft his wife her life *robbed*
 For she drank wine, though I had been his wife, *Because / if I*
 Ne should he not have daunted me from drink. *scared*
 And after wine, of Venus most I think,
 465 For all so siker as cold engenders hail, *surely / produces*
 A likerous mouth must have a likerous tail.³
 In woman vinolent is no defense, *full of wine*
 This knowen lechers by experience.

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

But, Lord Christ, when that it remembereth me *when I remember*

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*.

- 470 Upon my youth, and on my jollity,
 It tickleth me about my heartè's root.
 Unto this day it does my heartè boot *good*
 That I have had my world as in my time.
 But age, alas! that all will envenime, *envenom, poison*
 475 Hath me bereft my beauty and my pith. *robbed me / vigor*
 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. *try*
 480 Now will I tellen of my fourth husband.

My revenge

- I say I had in heartè great despite, *jealousy*
 That he of any other had delight; *other (woman)*
 But he was quit, by God and by Saint Joce: *repaid*
 I made him of the samè wood a cross,
 485 Not of my body in no foul mannér,
 But certainly I madè folk such cheer,¹
 That in his ownè grease I made him fry
 For anger and for very jealousy.
 By God, in earth I was his purgatory,
 490 For which I hope his soulè be in glory.
 For, God it wot, he sat full oft and sung, *God knows*
 When that his shoe full bitterly him wrung.²
 There was no wight, save God and he, that wist *that knew*
 In many wise how sorely I him twist. *ways / tortured*
 495 He died when I came from Jerusalem,
 And lies y-grave under the roodè-beam, *buried u. t. church cross*
 All is his tombè not so curious *Although / so elaborate*
 As was the sepulchre of him, Darius, *tomb*
 Which that Apelles wroughtè subtly. *made*

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 soulè rest.
 He is now in his grave and in his chest. *coffin*

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

Now of my fifthè husband will I tell.
 God let his soulè never come in Hell.
 505 And yet was he to me the mostè shrew; *roughest*
 That feel I on my ribbès 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*
 510 When that he wouldè have my *belle chose*, *body*
 That, though he had me beat in every bone,
 He couldè win again my love anon. *promptly*
 I trow, I loved him bestè for that he *I guess / because he*
 Was of his lovè daungerous to me. *sparing, cool*

515 We woman have, if that I shall not lie,
 In this matter a quaintè fantasy. *odd caprice*
 Wait what thing we may not lightly have, *Watch whatever*
 Thereafter will we cry all day and crave. *For that*
 Forbid us thing, and that desiren we;
 520 Press on us fast, and thennè 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 fifthè husband, God his soulè bless,
 Which that I took for love and not richesse,
 He sometime was a clerk of Oxenford, *was once a student*
 And had left school, and went at home to board *to lodge*

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. *my confidant*
- 530 God have her soul, her name was Alison.
 She knew my heart and all my privy, *secrets*
 Bet than our parish priest, so may I thee. *Better / thrive*
 To her bewrayed I my counsel all; *confided*
 For, had my husband pissèd 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 loved well, *whom*
 I would have told his counsel every deal,
 And so I did full often, God it wot, *God knows*
- 540 That made his face often red and hot
 For very shame, and blamed himself for he
 Had told to me so great a privy. *secret*

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 loved to be gay, *well dressed*
 And for to walk in March, April, and May
 From house to house, to hearen sundry talès)
 That Jankin Clerk, and my gossip, Dame Alice, *my confidant*
 And I myself, into the fieldès 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 *also*
 Of lusty folk. What wist I where my grace *lively / did I know / fortune*
 Was shapen for to be, or in what place? ¹
 555 Therefore made I my visitations
 To vigils, and to processions, *To evening services*
 To preachings eke, and to these pilgrimáges,
 To plays of miracles,² and 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 gayè scarlet gites. *And wore / gowns*
- 560 These wormès nor these mothès nor these mites
(Upon my peril!) fret them never a deal. *I assure you / ate*
And wost thou why? For they were usèd well. *know you why?*
- Now will I tellen forth what happened me:
I say, that in the fieldès walkèd we,
- 565 Till truly we had such dalliance *playful talk*
This clerk and I, that of my purveyance *foresight*
I spoke to him, and said him how that he,
If I were widow, shouldè wedden me.
For certainly, I say for no bobbance, *boasting*
- 570 Yet was I never without purveyance *provision*
Of marriage, nor of other thingès eke. *also*
I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek,
That has but one hole for to start into, *run to*
And if that failè, then is all y-do. *finished*
- 575 I borè him on hand he had enchanted me *convinced him*
(My damè taughtè me that subtlety); *My mother*
And eke I said, I mett of him all night, *I dreamed*
He would have slain me, as I lay upright, ¹ *face up*
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 damè's lore, ²
As well of that as of other thingès more. *in other*
- 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 *indeed / acted sad*

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, *custom*
 590 And with my kerchief covered my viságe; *face*
 But, for that I was purveyed of a make,¹ *provided w. a mate*
 I wept but small, and that I undertake. *I promise you*
 To churchè was my husband borne a-morrow *in morning*
 With neighèbours that for him madè sorrow,
 595 And Jankin, ourè clerk, was one of tho'. *those*
 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 *I guess, 20 years*
 And I was forty, if I shall say sooth, *truth*
 But yet I had always a coltè's tooth. *youthful taste*

My attractions

- Gat-toothed I was, and that became me well: *gap-toothed*
 I had the print of Saintè Venus' seal.²
 605 As help me God, I was a lusty one,
 And fair, and rich, and young, and well begone; *well endowed*
 And truly, as mine husbands toldè me,
 I had the bestè *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, *sexual desire*
 And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.
 Mine áscendent was Taur, and Mars therein. *sign was Taurus*

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 *always*
 By virtue of my constellation ¹
 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. *private*
 For God so wise be my salvation,
 I lovèd never by no discretion, *calculation*
 But ever followèd mine appetite *desire*
 All were he short or long or black or white. *Whether he was*
 625 I took no keep, so that he likèd me,
 How poor he was, nor eke of what degree.² *social rank*

*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, *charming*
 Has wedded me with great solemnity,
 630 And to him gave I all the land and fee *money*
 That ever was me given therebefore,
 But afterward repented me full sore.
 He wouldè suffer nothing of my list.³ *allow / my wishes*
 By God, he smote me once upon the list, *struck / ear*
 635 For that I rent out of his book a leaf, *Because I tore*
 That of the stroke mine earè waxed all deaf. *grew*
 Stubborn I was, as is a lioness,
 And of my tongue a very jangleress, *chatterer*
 And walk I would as I had done befor
 640 From house to house, although he had it sworn;
forbidden

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."

*He would quote "authorities" against women gallivanting about.
I paid no heed.*

	For which he oftentimes wouldè preach,	
	And me of oldè Roman gestès teach	<i>stories</i>
	How he, Simplicius Gallus, left his wife,	<i>How a man (named)</i>
	And her forsook for term of all his life,	
645	Not but for open-headed he her saw	<i>bareheaded</i>
	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	<i>because</i>
	Without his witting, he forsook her eke.	<i>knowledge / also</i>
650	And then would he upon his Bible seek	<i>he = Jankin</i>
	That ilkè proverb of Ecclesiast	<i>Ecclesiasticus 25:25</i>
	Where he commandeth and forbiddeth fast:	<i>firmly</i>
	`Man shall not suffer his wife go roll about.'	<i>allow / roam</i>
	Then would he say right thus withouten doubt:	
655	`Whoso that buildeth his house all of sallows,	<i>willows</i>
	And pricketh his blind horse over the fallows,	<i>spurs / fields</i>
	And suffereth his wife go seeken hallows,	<i>allows / shrines</i>
	Is worthy to be hangèd on the gallows.'	
	But all for nought, I settè not an haw	<i>straw</i>
660	Of his provérbs, nor of his oldè saw;	<i>old sayings</i>
	Nor I would not of him corrected be.	<i>by him</i>
	I hate them that my vices tellen me,	
	And so do more (God wot) of us than I.	<i>God knows</i>
	This made him wood with me all utterly;	<i>angry</i>
665	I wouldè not forbear him in no case. ²	
	Now will I say you sooth, by Saint Thomas,	<i>truth</i>
	Why that I rent out of his book a leaf,	<i>tore</i>
	For which he smote me, so that I was deaf.	<i>struck</i>

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
 670 For his desport he would it read alway, *amusement*
 He clepèd it Valere, and Theophrast,¹
 At whichè book he laughed always full fast.
 And eke there was sometime a clerk at Rome, *scholar*
 A cardinal that hightè Saint Jerome *was called*
 675 That made a book against Jovinian,
 In which book eke there was Tertullian,
 Chrysippus, Trotula, and Eloise,
 That was abbessè not far from Paris,
 And eke the Parables of Solomon,
 680 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)
 685 To readen in this book of wicked wives.
 He knew of them more legendès and lives
 Than be of goodè wivès in the Bible.
 For trusteth well, it is an impossible,
 That any clerk will spoken good of wives, *cleric*
 690 (But if it be of holy saintès' lives) *Unless*
 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 haddè written stories
 As clerkès have within their oratories, *cloisters*
 695 They would have writ of men more wickedness
 Than all the mark of Adam may redress. *race of A, i.e. men*
 The children of Mercury and of Venus
 Be in their working full contrarious. *opposed*
 Mercury loveth wisdom and sciéce, *knowledge*
 700 And Venus loveth riot and dispense. *parties & extravagance*
 And for their diverse disposition
 Each fails in other's exaltation. *domination*
 As thus, God wot, Mercury is desolate
 In Pisces, where Venus is exaltate,
 705 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 *nothing*
 Of Venus' workès worth his oldè shoe, *sexual activity*
 Then sits he down, and writes in his dotáge, *senility*
 710 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. *by God*
 Upon a night, Jankin that was our sire, *man of house*
 Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,
 715 Of Eva first, that for her wickedness *because of*
 Was all mankindè 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 heartè's blood again. *redeemed us*
 Lo here, express of woman may you find,
 720 That woman was the loss of all mankind.
 Then read he me how Samson lost his hairs: ¹ *Judges XVI, 15-20*
 Sleeping, his lemman cut them with her shears, *lover*
 Through whichè treason lost he both his eyen.

Classical examples

- Then read he me, if that I shall not lien,
 725 Of Hercules, and of his Dianire,
 That causèd him to set himself a-fire.²
 Nothing forgot he the sorrow and the woe,
 That Socrates had with his wivès two;
 How Xantippè cast piss upon his head.³
 730 This silly man sat still, as he were dead. *poor man*
 He wiped his head; no morè durst he sayn, *dared he say*
 But: `Ere that thunder stints there comes a rain.' *Before the t. stops*
 Of Pasiphae, that was the queen of Crete,
 For shrewèdness him thought the talè sweet.⁴ *nastiness*
 735 Fie, speak no more! It is a grisly thing
 Of her horrible lust and her liking. *(for a bull)*
 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 Thebès lost his life.
 My husband had a legend of his wife
 Eriphilè, that for an ouche of gold, brooch
 Has privily unto the Greekès told
- 745 Where that her husband hid him in a place, "Thebaid", Bk VII
 For which he had at Thebès sorry grace. bad fortune
 Of Livia told he me, and of Lucy.
 They bothè made their husbands for to die;
 That one for love, that other was for hate.
- 750 Livia her husband on an evening late
 Empoisoned has, for that she was his foe.
 Lucia likerous loved her husband so jealous
 That for he should always upon her think, (So) that
 She gave him such a manner lovè-drink
- 755 That he was dead ere it were by the morrow;
 And thus alगतès husbandès have sorrow. always
 Then told he me, how that one Latumius
 Complained unto his fellow Arius,
 That in his garden growèd such a tree
- 760 On which he said how that his wivès three
 Hangèd themselves for heartès déspitous. out of spite
 `O levè brother,' quod this Arius, dear
 `Give me a plant of thilkè blessèd tree, of that
 And in my garden planted shall it be.'
- 765 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 cover
 While that the corpse lay on the floor upright. face up
 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: Eryphele 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, | <i>moreover</i> |
| | Than in this world there growen grass or herbs. | |
| 775 | `Bet is,' quod he, `thine habitation | <i>It's better</i> |
| | Be with a lion, or a foul dragon, | <i>Ecclesiasticus 15: 16</i> |
| | Than with a woman using for to chide.' | <i>always scolding</i> |
| | `Bet is,' quod he, `high in the roof abide, | <i>Better</i> |
| | Than with an angry wife down in the house. | <i>Prov. 21: 9</i> |
| 780 | They be so wicked and contrarious | |
| | They hatè what their husbands loven, aye.' | <i>always</i> |
| | He said: `A woman casts her shame away, | |
| | When she casts off her smock; and furthermore, | <i>her shift</i> |
| | A fair woman, but she be chaste also, | <i>pretty / unless</i> |
| 785 | Is like a gold ring in a sowè's nose.' | <i>Proverbs 11: 22</i> |

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

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----------------------------|
| | Who couldè weenè, or who could suppose | <i>c. think or estimate</i> |
| | The woe that in my heart was, and the pine! | <i>resentment</i> |
| | And when I saw that he would never fine | <i>finish</i> |
| | To readen on this cursèd book all night, | |
| 790 | All suddenly three leavès have I plight | <i>plucked</i> |
| | Out of his book, right as he read, and eke | <i>and also</i> |
| | I with my fist so took him on the cheek | <i>punched</i> |
| | That in our fire he fell backward adown. | |
| | And up he starts as does a wood lion, | <i>jumped / angry</i> |
| 795 | And with his fist he smote me on the head | |
| | That on the floor I lay as I were dead. | <i>so that</i> |
| | And when he saw how stillè that I lay, | |
| | He was aghast, and would have fled his way, | |
| | Till at the last out of my swoon I braid: | <i>I woke</i> |
| 800 | `Oh, hast thou slain me, falsè thief ?' I said, | |
| | `And for my land thus hast thou murdered me? | |
| | Ere I be dead, yet will I kissen thee.' | <i>Before I die</i> |
| | And near he came, and kneelèd fair adown, | |

And saidé: `Dearè sister Alison,
 805 As help me God I shall thee never smite; *strike*
 What I have done it is thyself to wite, *blame*
 Forgive it me, and that I thee beseech.'
 And yet eftsoons I hit him on the cheek, *promptly*
 And saidé: `Thief! thus much am I wreak. *avenged*
 810 Now will I die, I may no longer speak.'

My husband's surrender and our reconciliation

But at the last, with muchè care and woe
 We fell accorded by ourselvès two. *were reconciled*
 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. *promptly right there*
 And when that I had gotten unto me
 By mastery all the sovereignty, *control*
 And that he said: `Mine ownè truè wife,
 820 Do as thee list the term of all thy life, *as you please, the length*
 Keep thine honoúr, and keep eke mine estate' — ¹
 After that day we never had debate. *argument*
 God help me so, I was to him as kind
 As any wife from Denmark unto Inde, *India*
 825 And also true, and so was he to me.
 I pray to God that sits in majesty
 So bless his soulè, 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."

- 830 "Now, Dame," quod he, "so have I joy or bliss,¹
 This is a long preamble of a tale." *preface to*
 And when the Summoner heard the Friar gale, *spout*
 "Lo," quod this Summoner, "Godè's armès two!
 A friar will intermit him evermore. *interpose himself always*
 835 Lo, goodè men, a fly and eke a frere *& also a friar*
 Will fall in every dish and eke mattér.
 What speak'st thou of preámbulation?
 What! Amble or trot or peace or go sit down. *be quiet*
 Thou lettest our disport in this mannér." *You spoil our fun*
 840 "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 elsè, Friar, I will beshrew thy face," *damn*
 845 Quod this Summoner, "and I beshrewè me, *I'll be damned*
 But if I tellè talès two or three *If I do not*
 Of friars, ere I come to Sittingbourne,
 That I shall make thy heartè for to mourn;
 For well I wot thy patience is gone." *I know*
 850 Our hostè crièd: "Peace, and that anon," *at once*
 And saidè: "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." *Go on, ma'am*
 "All ready, sir," quod she, "right as you lest, *please*
 855 If I have licence of this worthy Frere." *permission*
 "Yes, Dame," quod he, "tell forth, and I will hear." ²

The Wife of Bath's Tale

Fairies in King Arthur's Britain

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

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 Arthúr,
 Of which that Britons speaken great honoúr,
 All was this land fulfillèd of faèrie;
 860 The Elf-Queen, with her jolly company,
 Dancèd full oft in many a greenè mead. *meadow*
 This was the old opinion as I read.
 I speak of many hundred years ago,
 But now can no man see no elvès mo', *anymore*
 865 For now the greatè charity and prayers
 Of limiters and other holy freres, ¹
 That searchen every land and every stream,
 As thick as motès in the sunnè-beam,
 Blessing hallès, chambers, kitchens, bowers, *bedrooms*
 870 Cities, boroughs, castles, highè towers,
 Thorps and barns, shippens and dairiès— *Villages / sheep pens*
 This maketh that there be no fairiès,
 For there as wont to walken was an elf, *used to*
 There walketh now the limiter himself *begging friar*
 875 In undermeles and in mornings, *early and later a.m.*
 And says his matins and his holy things *morning prayers*
 As he goes in his limitation. *rounds*
 Women may go now safely up and down.
 In every bush and under every tree,
 880 There is no other incubus but he, *impregnating spirit*
 And he ne will not do them but dishonour. ³

Crime and punishment

And so befell it, that this king Arthúr

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, *young knight*
 That on a day came riding from the river
 885 And happened, that, alone as she was born,
 He saw a maiden walking him befor,
 Of whiché maid anon, maugre her head, *against her will*
 By very force he raft her maidenhead, *robbed her virginity*
 For which oppression was such clamour
 890 And such pursuit unto the king Arthúr
 That damnéd was this knight for to be dead *condemned*
 By course of law, and should have lost his head,
 (Peráventure such was the statute tho), *It seems / then*
 But that the queen and other ladies mo' *more*
 895 So longè prayèden the king of grace *for mercy*
 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. *destroy*

The Queen will pardon the offender on one condition

The queen thankèd the king with all her might;
 900 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, *position*
 That of thy life yet hast thou no surety;
 I grant thee life, if thou canst tellen me,
 905 What thing is it that women most desiren.
 Beware, and keep thy necké-bone from iron.
 And if thou canst not tell it me anon, *at once*
 Yet will I give thee leavè for to gon *to go*
 A twelvemonth and a day, to seek and lere *learn*
 910 An answer suffisant in this mattér. *satisfactory*
 And surety will I have, ere that thou pace, *assurance / go*
 Thy body for to yielde in this place.' *surrender*
 Woe was the knight, and sorrowfully he sigheth.
 But what? he may not do all as him liketh. *as he pleases*
 915 And at the last he chose him for to wend *go away*
 And come again right at the yearè's end
 With such answer as God would him purvey, *provide*

And takes his leave and wendeth forth his way.
 He seeketh every house and every place,
 920 Where as he hopeth for to finden grace, *good fortune*
 To learn what thingè women loven most.

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

But he ne could arriven in no coast, *country*
 Where as he mightè find in this mattér
 Two creatures according in fere. *agreeing together*
 925 Some saidè women loven best richesse,
 Some said honoúr, some saidè jolliness,
 Some rich array, some saidè lust a-bed, *expensive clothes*
 And often times to be widow and wed.
 Some saidè that our heartè is most eased
 930 When that we be y-flattered and y-pleased. ¹
 He goes full nigh the sooth, I will not lie; *near the truth*
 A man shall win us best with flattery;
 And with attendance and with busyness *great attentiveness*
 Be we y-limèd bothè more and less. *caught, ensnared*
 935 And somè sayen that we loven best
 For to be free, and do right as us lest, *as we please*
 And that no man reprove us of our vice
 But say that we be wise and nothing nice. *silly*
 For truly there is none of us all,
 940 If any wight will claw us on the gall, *person / sore spot*
 That we n'ill kick for that he says us sooth. ² *won't kick / truth*
 Assay, and he shall find it that so doth. *Try*
 For be we never so viciuous within, ³
 We will be holden wise and clean of sin. *want to be thought*
 945 And somè say that great delight have we
 For to be holden stable and eke secree, *discreet with secrets*

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. *disclose*
 But that tale is not worth a rake-stele. *rake handle*
 950 Pardee, we women cannè 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 thingès small, *(the Latin poet)*
 Said Midas haddè under his long hairs
 Growing upon his head two ass's ears;
 955 For whichè vice he hid, as he best might, *this defect*
 Full subtly from every mannè's sight, *v. cleverly*
 That, save his wife, there wist of it no mo'. *no one else knew*
 He loved her most, and trusted her also.
 He prayèd her, that to no creätüre
 960 She should not tellen of his dísfíguře. *disfigurement*
 She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win, *to him*
 She would not do that villainy nor sin *dishonor*
 To make her husband have so foul a name;
 She would not tell it for her ownè shame.
 965 But natheless her thoughtè that she died *would die*
 That she so longè should a counsel hide; *secret*
 Her thought it swelled so sore about her heart *It seemed to her*
 That needèly some word her must astart; ¹
 And since she durst not tell it to no man, *dared*
 970 Down to a marshè fastè by she ran.
 Till she came there, her heartè was afire,
 And as a bittern bumbleth in the mire, *bird calls in t. mud*
 She laid her mouth unto the water down.
 `Bewray me not, thou water, with thy sound,' *Betray*
 975 Quod she, `To thee I tell it, and no mo',
 Mine husband has long ass's earès two.
 Now is mine heart all whole, now it is out.
 I might no longer keep it, out of doubt.' *without 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.¹ *learn*

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. *spirit*
 But home he goes, he mightè not sojourn, *delay*
 The day was come that homeward must he turn.
 And on his way, it happened him to ride
 990 In all this care, under a forest side, *a forest's edge*
 Whereas he saw upon a dance go *Where*
 Of ladies four-and-twenty and yet mo'.
 Toward the whichè dance he drew full yern, *eagerly*
 In hope that some wisdom he should learn;
 995 But certainly, ere he came fully there,
 Vanishèd was this dance, he wist not where; *knew*

He meets an ugly old woman

No creätùrè 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.²
 Tell me what you seeken, by your fay. *faith*
 Péraventure it may the better be; *Perhaps*
 These oldè folk can muchel thing, 'quod she. *know a lot*
 1005 `My levè mother,' quod this knight, `certáin, *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 ¹
 What thing it is that women most desire.
 Could you me wiss, I would well quit your hire.' ²
 `Plight me thy truth here in mine hand,' quod she, *Give your word*
 1010 `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 *boast*
 1015 Thy life is safe, for I will stand thereby *I guarantee*
 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, *women's headdresses*
 That dare say nay of what I shall thee teach. *contradict*
 1020 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,³ *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*
 1025 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,
 1030 And afterward this knight was bid appear.
 To every wight commanded was silence, *every person*
 And that the knight should tell in audience *in public*
 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 liegè lady, generally,' quod he, *My lady Queen*
 `Women desiren to have sovereignty
 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.
 `Mercy,' quod she, `my sovereign lady queen, *Please*
 Ere that your court depart, as do me right. *Before*
 1050 I taughtè this answer unto the knight,
 For which he plighted me his truthè there, *pledged his word*
 The firstè 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 Godè's love, as choose a new request.
 Take all my goods, and let my body go.'
 `Nay, then,' quod she, `I shrew us bothè two, *a curse on*
 For though that I be foul and old and poor,
 I n'ould for all the metal nor the ore, *I would not*
 1065 That under earth is grave, or lies above, *buried*

But if thy wife I were and eke thy love.'¹ *unless I were*
 `My love?' quod he, `nay, my damnation !
 Alas! that any of my nation *family*
 Should e'er so foulè disparáged be.'² *degraded*

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

1070 But all for nought; the end is this, that he
 Constrained was; he needès must her wed,
 And taketh this old wife, and goes to bed.
 Now, wouldè some men say peráventure,
 That for my negligence I do no cure *take no care*
 1075 To tellen you the joy and all th'array *splendor*
 That at the feastè was that ilkè day. *same*
 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: *nothing but*
 1080 For privily he wedded her a-morrow; *privately / in the morning*
 And all day after hid him as an owl,
 So woe was him, his wifè looked so foul. *So unhappy / ugly*
 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. *tosses*
 This oldè wife lay smiling evermo',
 And said: `O dearè husband, ben'citee, *bless me!*
 Fares every knight thus with his wife as ye?³
 Is this the law of king Arthourè's house?
 1090 Is every knight of his thus daungerous? *cool, distant*
 I am your ownè love, and eke your wife, *also*
 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. *harm*
 Why fare you thus with me this firstè night?
 1095 You faren like a man had lost his wit. *You act*
 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, *so ugly*
 And thereto comen of so low a kind, *also / a family*
 That little wonder is though I wallow and wind; *twist & turn*
 So wouldè God mine heartè 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, *If it pleased me*
 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 spoken of such gentilesse, *But because*
 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 *(In) private & public*
 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 gentillesse,
 Not of our elders for their old riches. *ancestors*
 For though they gave us all their heritâge,
 1120 For which we claim to be of high parâge, *birth*
 Yet may they not bequeathen, for no thing, *in no way*
 To none of us, their virtuous living,
 That made them gentlemen y-callèd be,
 And bade us follow them in such degree. ¹

Dante and others on heredity and gentillesse

1125 Well can the wisè poet of Florénc
 That hightè Dante speak of this senténc. *named D./ this idea*
 Lo, in such manner rhyme is Dante's tale:
 `Full seld uprises by his branches small *seldom*
 Prowess of man, for God of his goodness
 1130 Wills that of Him we claim our gentillesse";²
 For of our elders may we nothing claim *ancestors*
 But temporal thing, that may man hurt and maim.
 Eke every wight wot this as well as I. *person / knows*
 If gentillesse were planted naturally *by birth*
 1135 Unto a certain lineage down the line,
 Privy and apert then would they never fine *cease*
 To do of gentillesse the fair office;³ *good works*
 They mighten do no villainy nor vice. *could not do*
 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.'" "

- 1140 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 *as if*
Its nature
- 1145 Up peril of my life, till that it die. *= On peril = I swear*
 Here may you see well, how that gentry
 Is not annexèd to possession,
 Since folk ne do their operation
 Always as does the fire, lo, in its kind. *its nature*
- 1150 For God it wot, men may well often find *God knows*
 A lord's son do shame and villainy.
 And he that will have price of his gentry, *wants respect for*
 For he was born of a gentle house, *(Just) Because*
 And had his elders noble and virtuous, *ancestors*
- 1155 And n'ill himselfè do no gentle deeds, *n'ill = will not*
 Nor follow his gentle ancestor, that dead is —
 He is not gentle, be he duke or earl,
 For villain's sinful deedès make a churl.
 Thy gentilessè is but renomee *only the renown*
- 1160 Of thine ancestors, for their high bounty, *fine qualities*
 Which is a strangè thing to thy person. *foreign to*
 For gentilessè comes from God alone.²
 Then comes our very gentillesse of grace;
 It was no thing bequeathed us with our place. *rank*
- 1165 Thinketh how noble, as says Valerius, *(Roman historian)*
 Was thilkè Tullius Hostilius
 That out of povertè rose to high noblesse.
 Read Seneca, and readeth eke Boece,³ *Boethius also*

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 *povertè*, 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*
 1170 That he is gentle that does gentle deedès.
 And therefore, leve husband, I thus conclude, *dear husband*
 All were it that mine ancestors were rude, *Although / "lowborn"*
 Yet may the highè God, and so hope I,
 Grant me grace to liven virtuously.
 1175 Then am I gentle when that I begin
 To liven virtuously and waiven sin. *give up*

The virtues of poverty

- And there as you of poverte me repreeve,¹
 The highè God, in whom that we believe,
 In willful poverte chose to live His life.
 1180 And certès 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 clerkès sayn. *Seneca & other writers*
 1185 Whoso that holds him paid of his povérte,
 I hold him rich, all had he not a shirt.² *Whoever is happy in*
 He that covets is a poorè wight, *creature*
 For he would have what is not in his might.
 But he that naught has, nor coveteth to have,
 1190 Is rich, although men hold him but a knave. *servant*
 Very povérte singeth properly.³ *True p. / naturally*
 Juvenal says of poverte merrily: *Satire X, 21*
 `The poorè 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 povert(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.' *In front of*
- 1195 Povérte is hateful good; and, as I guess,
A full great bringer out of busyness; *diligence*
A great amender eke of sapience *improver / wisdom*
To him that taketh it in patience.
- Povérte's a thing, although it seem alenge,¹ *unpleasant (?)*
- 1200 Possession that no wight will challenge.
Povérte full oftè, when a man is low,
Maketh himself and eke his God to know.
Povérte's a spectacle, as thinketh me,² *glass / seems to me*
Through which he may his very friendès see. *true friends*
- 1205 And, therefore, Sir, since that I not you grieve,
Of my povérte no morè me reprove. *reprove*

Her age and ugliness

- Now, Sir, of eld, that you repreven me: *old age*
And certès, Sir, though no authority *written opinion*
Were in no book, you gentles of honoúr
- 1210 Say that men should an old wight do favoúr *respect an old person*
And clepe him "father", for your gentillesse; *call him f. / courtesy*
And authors shall I finden, as I guess.³
- Now, where you say that I am foul and old,
Then dread you not to be a cuckèwold. *ugly*
cuckold
- 1215 For filth and eldè, also may I thee, *age / I assure you*
Be greatè wardens upon chastity.⁴ *guardians of*
But natheless, since I know your delight, *pleasure*

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.

sexual

She offers him a choice between two things

- Choose now,' quod she, `one of these thingès tway: *two*
- 1220 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 elsè you will have me young and fair,
And take your áventure of the repair *chance / visiting*
- 1225 That shall be to your house because of me,
(Or in some other place it may well be).¹
Now choose yourselfè whether that you liketh. *which one pleases you*
This knight aviseth him, and sorè sigheth, *thinks to himself*
But at the last he said in this mannér:

*He lets **her** choose*

- 1230 `My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
I put me in your wisè governance.
Choose yourself which may be most pleasánce
And most honoúr to you and me also;
I do no force the whether of the two.² *I don't care*
- 1235 For as you liketh, it sufficeth me.' *As you please*
`Then have I got of you mastery,' quod she,
`Since I may choose and govern as me lest?' *as I please*
`Yea, certès, wife,' quod he, `I hold it best.'
`Kiss me,' quod she, `we be no longer wroth, *angry*
- 1240 For by my truth I will be to you both,
This is to say, yea, bothè fair and good. *pretty & faithful*
I pray to God that I may starven wood, *die mad*
But I to you be all so good and true *Unless*

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;
 1245 And but I be to-morrow as fair to seen *unless*
 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. *as you please*
 Cast up the curtain, look how that it is.'

The happy result

1250 And when the knight saw verily all this, *truly*
 That she so fair was, and so young thereto,
 For joy he hent her in his armès two: *he seized*
 His heartè bathèd in a bath of bliss,
 A thousand times a-row he gan her kiss; *in a row*
 1255 And she obeyèd him in every thing
 That mightè do him pleasance or liking.
 And thus they live unto their livès end
 In perfect joy.

A prayer of sorts

And Jesus Christ us send *(May) Christ send us*
 Husbands meekè, young, and fresh a-bed,
 1260 And grace to overbide them that we wed. *to outlive*
 And eke I prayè Jesus short their lives *also / shorten*
 That will not be governèd by their wives.
 And old and angry niggards of dispense, *tight spenders*
 God send them soon a very pestilence. *veritable plague*