

The Wife of Bath's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale

“Experience, though it would be no authority in this world, would be quite sufficient for me, to speak of the woe that is in marriage; for, gentle people, since I was twelve years old--thank God, Who lives forever--I have had five husbands at the church-door (for I have been wedded so often); and all were worthy men in their ranks. But in truth I was told not long ago that since Christ went only once to a wedding, in Cana of Galilee¹, by that same example he taught me that I should be wedded only once. Lo! Hear what a sharp word Jesus, man and God, spoke on a certain occasion beside a well, in reproof of the Samaritan woman². He said, ‘You have had five husbands; and that man who has you now is not your husband.’ Thus he said, certainly. What he meant by it I cannot say; but I ask, why the fifth man was no husband to the Samaritan woman. 22

“How many could she have in marriage? At this point I have never in my life heard a designation of the number. Men may divine and interpret up and down, but well I know, surely, God expressly instructed us to increase and multiply. I can well understand that noble text. Likewise, I know well he said also that my husband should leave father and mother and take me. But he did not mention any number, not bigamy or of octogamy. Why should men speak villainously of them? 34

“Lo, Sir Solomon³ the wise king! I believe he had more than one wife, and I wish to God it were lawful for me to be refreshed half so often! What a gift of God he had in all his wives! No man who lives in this world now has so many. God knows this noble king, to my thinking, had a merry life with each of them, so joyous was his lot! Blessed be God that I wedded five! And they were the best that I could pick out,

¹ Wedding at Cana. John 2:1-12. Jesus performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, at which he turned water into wine.

² Samaritan woman. John 4:1-42. The Wife of Bath is largely accurate in her retelling of the story, though her reaction is suspect.

³ Solomon. OT King, second son of David, who ruled Israel about 970-933 in great prosperity; known for his great wisdom.

both in their bodies and of their coffers. A variety of schools make perfect scholars, and much practice in a variety of employments truly makes the perfect workman. I have the schooling of five husbands. I would welcome the sixth, whenever he shall come! In truth, I will not keep myself wholly chaste; when my husband has departed from the world, then some other Christian man shall wed me. For then, the apostle says, I am free, in God's name, to wed where I wish. 50

“He says that it is no sin to be wedded; it is better to be wedded than to burn. What do I care if people speak badly of cursed Lamech⁴ and his bigamy? Well I know Abraham⁵ was a holy man, and Jacob⁶ as well, as far as I know, and each of them had more than two wives. And many other holy men did as well. 58

“When have you seen that in any time great God forbade marriage explicitly? Tell me, I pray you. Or where did he command virginity? You know as well as I, without a doubt, that the apostle, when he speaks of maidenhood, says that he had no instructions on it. Men may counsel a woman to be single, but counseling is not commanding; he left it to our own judgment. For if God had commanded maidenhood, then with that same word had he condemned marrying. And certainly, if no seed were sown, from where then should virgins spring? Paul dared not command a thing for which his master gave no order. The prize is set for virginity--win it who can. Let us see who runs best⁷. 76

“But this command is not to be taken by every creature, but only where Almighty God wishes to give it through his might. The apostle was a virgin, I know well, but nevertheless, though he wrote that he wished every creature to be like him, all that is only advice to be a virgin; and he gave me leave and indulgence to be a wife⁸. So likewise, if my spouse

⁴ Lamech. Genesis 4:23ff. A descendant of Cain and the first bigamist, he was married to Adah and Zillah.

⁵ Abraham. Genesis. Biblical patriarch of the Hebrew nation who had two wives, Sarah and Hagar, and one concubine, Keturah.

⁶ Jacob. Genesis. Abraham's grandson, who also had two wives, Leah and Rachel.

⁷ Who runs the best. Virginity is seen here as the prize awarded to the winner of a race.

⁸ The Apostle. Paul. 1 Corinthians 7:1-6. Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: “It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman,” but because of cases of immorality every man should have his own wife, and every woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her

should die, there is no shame or charge of bigamy to marry me. It would be good, he said, to touch no woman, for it is a peril to bring together fire and hay. You know what this example may mean. 90

“This is the sum of it all: the apostle held virginity to be more perfect than marriage because of weakness. I call them weak unless man and wife would lead all their life in chastity. I grant it well, I have no malice even if maidenhood were set above remarriage. It pleases them to be clean, body and soul; of my own estate I will make no boast. For you well know that not every vessel in a lord's house is made of gold; some are of wood, and do their lord service. God calls people to him in various manners, and each one has his own gift from--one this, one that, as it pleases God to provide. Virginity is a great perfection, and devoted chastity as well. 106

But Christ, the fountain of perfection, did not instruct every person to go sell all that he had and give to the poor, and in such a fashion follow him and his footsteps. “He spoke this to those people who wished to be perfect; and by your leave, gentle people, I am not one of those. I will use the flower⁹ of my life in the acts and fruits of marriage. 114

Tell me also, for what purpose were members of procreation made, and made in such a perfect manner? Trust well, they were not made for nothing. Whosoever wishes to interpret may do so, and interpret things up and down that and say that they were made for purging urine and that both our small things were also to know a female from a male and for no other cause--did someone say no? Those with experience know well it is not so. So that scholars will not be angry with me, I say this: that they are made for both; that is to say, for duty and for ease of procreation, providing we do not displease God. Why should men otherwise set down in their books that man shall yield to his wife her debt? Now with what should he make his payment, if he did not use his blessed instrument? They were made then upon a creature to purge urine, and for procreation as well. 134

husband. A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control. This I say by way of concession, however, not as a command.

⁹ Flower. Best years.

But I do not say that every person who has such equipment is bound to go and use it for procreation. For that reason people should men take no heed of chastity. Christ was a virgin and created as a man, as were many saints since the beginning of the world; yet they always lived in perfect chastity. I will not envy any virginity. Let virgins be called bread of purified wheat-seed, and let us wives be called barley-bread; and yet, as Mark can tell, our Lord Jesus refreshed many people with barley-bread¹⁰. I will persevere in such a state as God has called us to; I am not particular. In wifeness I will use my instrument as freely as my Maker has sent it. If I am unaccommodating to my husband, may God give me sorrow. My husband shall have it both evening and morning, whenever it pleases him to come forth and pay his debt. I will not stop. I will have a husband who will be both my debtor and servant, and have his tribulation upon his flesh, while I am his wife¹¹. As long as I live I, and not he, have the power over his body. The apostle told it to me in this very way, and instructed our husbands to love us well¹². This entire subject pleases me well, every bit. 162

Up started the Pardoner, and without delay. “Now lady,” he said, “by God and St. John, you are a noble preacher in this matter! I was about to wed a wife; alas! Why should I pay for it so dearly upon my flesh? I would rather not wed any wife this year.” 168

“Wait! My tale is not yet begun,” she said. “No, before I go you shall drink out of another barrel that will taste worse than ale. And when I have told my story to you about the tribulation in marriage, in which I have been expert all my life (that is to say, I myself have been the scourge), then you may choose whether you will sip of that same barrel that I shall broach. Be mindful, before you come too close; for I shall tell half a score of examples. ‘Whosoever will not be warned by other men, by him shall other men

¹⁰ Barley bread. Mark. Perhaps John 6:9. (From the story of the loaves and fish.) One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?” Her reference might be just one of common sense as well.

¹¹ Tribulation. 1 Corinthians 7:28. If you marry, however, you do not sin, nor does an unmarried woman sin if she marries; but such people will experience affliction in their earthly life, and I would like to spare you that.

¹² Apostle. Paul. 1 Corinthians 7:4-5. A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control.

be corrected': these same words writes Ptolemy; read his *Almagest*¹³." 183

"Lady," said this Pardoner, "I would pray you, if it were your pleasure, tell your tale as you began, hold back for no man, and teach us young men from your experience." 187

"Gladly," she said, "if it may please you. But I beg all of you in this company, if I speak according to my fancy, do not take it amiss. For my intent is but to make sport. Now, sirs, I will continue. 193

"May I never see another drop of ale or wine, if I did not tell the truth about my husbands, as three of them were good, and two of them were bad. The three men were good, rich and old, and they hardly could keep their obligation to me, by which they were bound to me. By God, you know well what I mean by this. May God help me, I laugh when I think how pitifully I made them work at night! And, by my faith, I found it useless. I did not need to make an effort or pay them any respect to win their love. They loved me so well, by God above, that I set no value on their love. A wise woman will always attempt to win love where she has none; but since I had them wholly in my hand and had all their land, why should I bother to please them, unless it were for my profit and pleasure? I ruled them so, by my faith, that many nights they sang 'alas!' 216

"Not for them, I believe, was fetched the bacon that some men win at Dunmow in Essex¹⁴. I governed them so well by my rules that each of them was blissful and glad to bring me beautiful things from the fair. They were glad when I spoke friendly to them, for God knows, I chided them without mercy. Now listen, you wise wives who can understand, hear how craftily I behaved myself. 225

"Thus shall you speak, and thus you shall put them in the wrong, for there is no man who can swear and lie half so boldly as a woman. I say this for the benefit of wise wives when they have made a little misstep. A wise wife, if she knows what is good for her, shall make a man believe that the jackdaw is mad¹⁵, and shall use her own maid as a witness to confirm it. 234

¹³ *Almagest*. An Astrological treatise by the second-century author, Ptolemy of Alexandria.

¹⁴ Bacon: "A side of bacon was awarded to spouses who lived a year and a day without quarreling" (Benson)

¹⁵ Jackdaw is mad. An allusion to the tale in which a husband uses a bird, a chough or jackdaw, to report his wife's actions. See also *The Manciple's Tale*.

"But now hear how I spoke: -'Old sir fogley, is this how you would have things? Why is my neighbor's wife so fine? She is honored everywhere she goes, while I have no decent clothes and must sit at home. Are you in love? What are you doing at my neighbor's house? Is she so fair? What do you whisper with our maid? God bless! Leave behind your tricks, old sir lecher! And if I have a friend or a gossip, completely innocent, and I walk to his house or amuse myself there, you chide me like a fiend. You come home as drunk as a mouse and sit on your bench preaching, with no good reason. You say to me, it is a great evil to wed a poor woman, for the cost; and if she were rich, of noble birth, then you say that it is a torment to suffer her pride and her melancholy. And if she were fair, you say that every lecher will have her, you very knave! She who is assailed on every side cannot remain in chastity for long. 256

"You say that some folk desire us for our wealth, some for our figure, some for our beauty, some because we can sing or dance, some for our manners and mirth, and some for our hands and slim arms. Thus all goes to the Devil, by your account. 262

"You say that a castle wall can not be defended when it is assailed so long from every side. And if a woman be foul, then you say that she covets every man she sees, and will leap on him like a spaniel, until she find some man to do business with her. You say no goose in the lake that is too grey to look for a mate. And you say that it is a hard matter to control a thing that no man would be willing to keep. 272

"Thus you say, old fool, when you are going to bed; that no wise man need marry, nor any man who hopes for heaven. With a wild thunder-clap and fiery lightning-bolt may your withered neck be snapped in two! You say that leaky houses, smoke, and chiding wives, make men flee from their own homes. 280

"Ah, God bless! What ails such an old man to scold like this? You say that we wives will cover our vices until we are safely married, and then we show them. That is a villain's proverb! You say that oxen, asses, horses, and hounds are tested for some time before men buy them, and so are basins, wash-bowl, spoons, stools, pots, clothes, attire, and all such household stuff; but people make no test of wives until they are wedded. And then, you old rascally dotard, you say, we will show our vices. 292

"You say also it displeases me unless you praise my beauty and gaze ever upon my face and call me "fair lady" everywhere; and unless you make a feast on my

birthday, and dress me gay and freshly; and unless you do honor to my nurse, and to my maid in my bower, and to my father's family-- all this you say, old barrel-full of lies. 302

“And yet you have gathered a false suspicion of our apprentice Jankin, for his crisp hair shining like fine gold, and because he escorts me back and forth. I would not have him, even if you should die tomorrow! But tell me this--and bad luck to you!-- why do you hide the keys of your chest from me? By God, they are my goods as well as yours! Why do you intend to make a fool of the mistress of your house? Now by the lord who is called St. James¹⁶, however you may rage, you shall not be master both of my body and of my goods; you must give up one of them, in spite of your eyes. 315

“What good does it do if you inquire after me or spy upon me? You want to lock me in your chest, I believe! You should say, “Wife, go where you wish, take your pleasure, I will believe no tales; I know you for a true wife, Lady Alice.” We love no man who takes note or care where we go; we wish to have our freedom. May he be blessed of all men, that wise astrologer, Sir Ptolemy, who says this proverb in his book *Almagest*, “Of all men, he who never cares who has the world in hand has the greatest wisdom.” You are to understand by this proverb that you have enough: why do you need to care how well-off other people are? For in truth, old fogey, you shall have plenty of pleasing thing in the evening. He who will forbid a man to light a candle at his lantern is too great a miser; by God, he should have light, nevertheless. So you have enough; you need not complain. 336

“You say also that if we make ourselves amorous with clothing and with costly dress, it would be a peril to our chastity; and yet--may the plague take you!--you must confirm it with these words of the apostle: “Ye women shall apparel yourselves in garments made with chastity and shame,” he said, “and not with tressed hair and splendid gems and pearls, nor with gold, nor rich clothes¹⁷.” I would not give a fly for your text or your rubric. 347

¹⁶ St. James. Probably St. James of Compostella. His shrine, like that of St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury, was a popular destination for pilgrims.

¹⁷ 1 Timothy 2.9-10. Similarly, (too,) women should adorn themselves with proper conduct, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hairstyles and gold ornaments, or pearls, or expensive clothes, but rather, as befits women who profess reverence for God, with good deeds.

“You said also I was like a cat; for a cat, if someone were to singe the cat's skin, will always dwell at home; but if she were sleek and elegant in her fur, she will not remain in the house an hour, but before any day would dawn, will go forth to show her skin and go a-caterwauling. This is to say, sir rogue, if I am finely dressed, I will run out to show my clothes. 356

“Sir old fool, what ails you to spy after me? Even if you were to ask Argus¹⁸ to be my sentry with his hundred eyes as best he can, in faith, he shall not keep watch over me unless it suits me. Still I could deceive him, as I hope to prosper! 361

“You say also that there are three things that trouble this entire world, and that no creature can endure the fourth. Oh, dear sir rascal, may Jesus shorten your life! Still you preach and say a hateful woman is considered one of these adversities. Are there no other things you can use for comparison without an innocent wife being one of them? 370

“You compare woman's love to hell, or to barren land where no water can lie. You compare it also to wildfire; the more it burns, the more it desires to consume everything that can be burned. You say that just as worms destroy a tree, so too a wife destroys her husband; those who are tied to women know this. 379

“Gentle people, in this very way, as you can see, I would firmly swear to my old husbands, that they said this in their drunkenness; and all was false, except I got Jankin and my niece to be my witnesses. O Lord! The pain and woe I did them, though they were innocent, by God's sweet suffering! For I could bite and whinny like a horse. I knew how to complain, even if I was guilty; or else I would have often been undone. He who first comes to the mill, grinds first; I complained first, and thus our war was ended. They were very glad to excuse themselves hurriedly of things that they never had done in all their lives. I would accuse my old husband of visiting prostitutes, even when they were so sick that they could scarcely stand. 394

“Yet I tickled his heart because he thought that I had such great fondness for him. I swore that all my walking about at night was to spot wenches whom he slept with. Under that pretext I had many privy jests at him; for all such wit is given to us when we are

¹⁸ Argus. Guardian with 100 eyes who watched over Io, one of Zeus' loves, at the command of Hera, Zeus' wife. Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. 1.165.

born. God has given deceit, weeping, and spinning to women by nature, so long as they live. 402

“And thus I boast of one thing for myself: in the end I had the better in every way, by cunning, or by force, or by some type of device, such as continual murmuring or grumbling. And most chiefly at night they had ill fortune; then I would scold and grant him no pleasure. I would not stay in bed any longer if I felt his arm over my side, until he had paid his ransom to me. And therefore I tell this to every man: let he who can, prosper, for everything has its price. Men may lure no hawks with an empty hand. For the sake of gain I would give them their way, and pretend to have an appetite; and yet I never had pleasure in bacon, from Dunmow or elsewhere. And so I would be chiding them all the time; even if the pope had sat beside them, by my word, I would not spare them at their own table. I repaid them word for word; so may the Almighty Lord help me, if I ere to make my testament right now, I would not owe them a word that has not been repaid. By my wits I made it so that they were glad to surrender, as their best option, or we would have never been at peace. For though my husband looked like a mad lion, he was nonetheless bound to fail in his purpose. 430

“Then would I say, ‘Good dear, take note how meekly Wilkin our sheep looks; come near, my spouse, let me kiss your cheek. You should be all patient and mild, and have a sweet tender conscience, since you thus preach of the patience of Job. Always endure, since you can preach so well; and unless you do, we must teach you for sure that it is pleasant to have a wife in peace. Truly, one of us two must bend to the other and since a man is more reasonable than a woman, you must be patient. What ails you to grumble and groan in this way? Is it because you want to have my body all to yourself? Why, take it all! Have every bit! By Peter, I curse you, but you love it well! If I would sell my beautiful thing, I could walk as fresh as a rose, but I will keep it for your own taste. You are to blame, by God! I tell you the truth.’” We had this sort of words between us; but now I will speak about my fourth husband. 453

“My fourth husband was a reveller, that is to say, he had a paramour--and I was young and full of frolic, stubborn and strong, and jolly as a magpie. I could dance well to a little harp, and sing like any nightingale, when I had taken a draught of sweet wine. Metellius, the filthy churl, the swine, who with a staff bereft his spouse of her life, because she drank wine, would not have frightened me from drink, if I had been his wife! And when I think of wine I must

think of Venus¹⁹; for just as surely as cold engenders hail, a lecherous mouth leads to a lecherous body. There is no defense in a woman who is full of wine, as lechers know by experience. 469

“Lord Christ! But when I think about my youth and mirth, it tickles me at the root of my heart! To this very day it does my heart good that I have had my fling in my time. But alas! Age, which envenoms all things, has bereft me of my beauty and energy. Let them go. Farewell! May the Devil go with them! The flour is gone, and there is no more to say; now I sell the bran as best as I can. But even now I will strive to be very merry. 479

“Now I will tell of my fourth husband. I say I had great resentment in my heart that he had pleasure in any other. But by the Lord and Saint Joce²⁰, he was paid back! I made a cross from the same wood for his back; not with my body, in any foul manner, but truly I offered people such generous hospitality that for anger and absolute jealousy I made him fry in his own grease. By God, I was his purgatory on earth, wherefore I hope that his soul is in glory now²¹. 491

“For God knows, he sat often and sang, when his shoe pinched him bitterly: No creature knew, except God and he, how sorely I twisted him in so many ways. He died when I returned home from Jerusalem, and lies buried under the cross-beam²², albeit his tomb is not quite as elaborately crafted as the sepulcher of Darius²³ that Apelles²⁴ so skilfully made. It would have been a waste to bury him at such an expense! Farewell to him; he is now in his grave and in his coffin--God rest his soul! 502

“Now will I speak of my fifth husband--may God never allow his soul to enter hell! And yet he was the most villainous to me, as I can still feel on my ribs all in a row, and ever shall to my ending day. But he was so fresh and merry, and could sweet-talk so well that, even if he had beaten me on every bone, he could

¹⁹ Venus. In a general sense, she is referring to activity Venus associated with Venus, i.e., sex.

²⁰ Saint Joce. St. Judocus. There is no clear reason for calling on him here. He is a patron saint of sailors.

²¹ In glory now. The fact that she, by making him jealous, sent him through Purgatory means that his sins were purged and thus prepared for Heaven.

²² Cross-beam. The “rood-beam” supported the cross in a church between the chancel and nave.

²³ Darius. Sixth Century Iranian ruler known for his elaborate sepulcher.

²⁴ Apelles. “the Jewish craftsman supposedly responsible for Darius’ tomb” (Benson)

soon win my beautiful thing again. I believe I loved him best, because he was sparing in his love. 514

“We women have, to tell the truth, an odd fantasy on this matter; whatever thing we can not easily win we will cry after continually and crave. “Forbid us something, and we desire that thing. Press on us hard, and then we will flee. With much reserve we offer our merchandise; a large crowd at the market makes our wares expensive; wares offered at too low a price will be thought to have little value. Every wise woman knows this. 524

“My fifth husband--may God bless his soul--which I took for love and not for riches, was sometime an Oxford scholar; and he had left school, and went to board with my good friend, who dwelt in our town. May God keep her soul! Her name was Alisoun. She knew my heart and my private thoughts better than our parish priest, by my soul! To her I revealed all my secrets. 533

“For had my husband peed on a wall, or done something that would have cost him his life, I would have told his every bit of his secret to her, and to another worthy wife, and to my niece, whom I loved well. And I did so often, God knows, which often made his face red and hot for true shame, and he would blame himself for telling me so great a secret. 542

“And so it happened that once, in Lent, (as I so often did, I visited my friend, for I still always loved to be merry, and to walk from house to house in March, April, and May, to hear various tales) that Jankin the clerk, my friend dame Alice, and I walked into the fields. All that spring my husband was in London; I had a better opportunity to play, and to see and to be seen by lusty folk. What did I know about how my fortune was to be shaped or in what place? Therefore, I made my visits to holy day vigils, to processions, to sermons, to these pilgrimages, to miracle-plays²⁵, and to weddings, and wore my gay scarlet gowns. These worms and moths and mites never ate a bit of them, upon my peril! And do you know why? Because they were well used²⁶. 562

“Now I will tell what happened to me. I say that we walked in the fields, until in truth we had such flirtation together, this clerk and I, that in my foresight I spoke to him, and told him how he should

wed me, if I were widowed. For, I am not speaking in boast; I was certainly never to this point without provision for marriage--nor for other things as well. I think that a mouse's heart is not worth a leek if the mouse has but one hole to run to; and if that one fails, then all is over. 574

“I persuaded him to think that he had enchanted me; my mother taught me that trick. And I said also I dreamed of him all night; he would have slain me as I lay on my back, and my whole bed was full of real blood; but yet I hoped that he should bring good fortune to me, for blood signifies gold, as I was taught. And all of it was false; I dreamed not a bit of it, but I followed my mother's teaching all along, as well as in other things besides. 584

“But now, sir, let me see; what shall I say now? Aha! By God, I have it again. When my fourth husband lay on his bier, I wept ever and made a sorrowful expression, as wives must, for it is the custom; and I covered my face with my kerchief. But since I had been provided with a new mate, I wept rather little, I vow. 592

“In the morning my husband was borne to church by the neighbors, who mourned for him, and our scholar Jankin was one of them. So may God help me, when I saw him go after the bier, I thought he had so clean and fair a pair of legs and feet that I gave him all my heart to keep. He was twenty winters old, I believe, and if I am to tell the truth, I was forty. But I always had a colt's tooth. I was gap-toothed; I bore the print of Saint Venus' birthmark²⁷, and that became me well. I was a lusty one, and fair, and rich, and youthful, and merry of heart, may God help me. 608

“For certainly, I am dominated by the planet Venus in my senses, and my heart is dominated by the planet Mars. Venus gave me my love for pleasure and my wantonness, and Mars my sturdy hardihood. My ascendant was Mars in Taurus. Alas, alas! That ever love was thought a sin! I followed ever my inclination by virtue of my constellation. That made it that I could not withhold my chamber from any good fellow. Yet I have the mark of Mars upon my face and in another private place as well. May God be my salvation indeed, I never loved discreetly, but always followed my appetite, whether he was short or tall, black or white it did not matter to me, as long as

²⁵ Miracle plays. Popular festival dramas on various biblical topics, often played in a sequence or cycle of plays.

²⁶ Well used. Her clothes never sat in storage, so the insects never had time to get at them.

²⁷ Saint Venus' birthmark. Chaucer sometimes refers to mythological figures such as Venus or Cupid as Saint or Sir; by birthmark, the Wife of Bath means that she was made in the image of Venus.

he pleased me, how poor he was, nor of what station.
626

“What should I say but at the end of a month this jolly clerk Jankin, who was so debonair, wedded me with great splendor? And I gave him all the land and wealth that I had ever been given; but afterwards I repented myself sorely, for he would allow nothing that I desired. By God, he struck me once on the ear! That was because I tore a leaf out of his book and my ear grew entirely deaf because of the blow. I was as stubborn as a lioness, and a very chatterbox with my tongue, and I would walk as I had done before from house to house, though he had sworn I should not. For this reason he would often make homilies and teach me old Roman histories how Symplcius Gallus left his wife and forsook her for all his days, just because he saw her one day looking out of his door with her head uncovered. 646

“He told me the name of another Roman who forsook his wife also because without his knowledge she was to a summer game. And then he would seek in his Bible that proverb of the Ecclesiast²⁸ where he commands and firmly forbids that a man should allow his wife to go wander about. Then indeed he would say just this,

“He who builds his house out of shallows²⁹,
And spurs his blind horse over fallows³⁰,
And allows his wife to seek hallows³¹,
Then should be hanged upon the gallows.”

But all for nothing; I did not care one acorn for his proverbs or his old saying, and I would not be scolded by him. I hate anyone who tells me my faults; and, God knows, so too do more of us than I. This made him insanely furious with me, but I would not tolerate him in any case. 665

“Now, by Saint Thomas³², I will tell you the truly, why I tore a leaf out of his book, for which he struck me so that I became deaf. He had a book which he would be still reading, night and day, for his amusement. He called it Valerius and Theophrastus³³;

²⁸ Ecclesiasticus (Sirach). 25. 24-25. Allow water no outlet, and be not indulgent to an erring wife. If she walks not by your side, cut her away from you.

²⁹ Shallows. Willow twigs

³⁰ Fallows. Fallow or uncultivated fields

³¹ Hallows. Holy places, shrines.

³² St. Thomas à Becket of Canterbury.

³³ Valerius and Theophrastus. These authors as well as Jerome, Tertulian, and Chrisippus all wrote anti-feminist tracks that preached of the wickedness of women and that it was best for men to avoid them entirely. Trotula was a woman physician who wrote of the diseases of women. In her writings Heloise explains why she wishes not to marry.

he always laughed uproariously at this book. And there was also once a scholar at Rome, a cardinal, named Saint Jerome, who composed a book against Jovinian; and besides this in my husband's book there were Tertullian, Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise, who was abbess not far from Paris, and also the Proverbs of Solomon, Ovid's *Art of Love* and many other books; and all these were bound in one volume. 681

“And every night and day, when he had leisure and freedom from other outside occupation, it was his habit to read in this book about wicked women; of them he knew more lives and legends than there are of good women in the Bible. For, trust well, it is an impossibility that any scholar will speak well of women, unless it would be of the lives of holy saints; but never of any other woman. Who painted the Lion, tell me? By God, if women had written histories, as scholars have in their chapels, they would have written about men more evil than all the sons of Adam could redress. 696

“The children of Mercury and the children of Venus are contrary in their actions; Mercury loves wisdom and knowledge, and Venus revelry and extravagance. And, because of their contrary natures, each of these planets descends in sign of the zodiac in which the other is most powerful; thus Mercury is depressed in Pisces, where Venus is exalted, and Venus is depressed where Mercury is exalted. Therefore no woman is praised by any scholar. When the scholar is old and entirely unable to give Venus service that is even worth his old shoe, then he sits down and in his dotage writes that women cannot keep their marriage vow! 710

“But now to my tale--why I was beaten for a book, by God, as I told you. One night Jankin, our husband, sat by the fire and read in his book, first about Eve, for whose wickedness all mankind was brought to misery, for which Jesus Christ Himself was slain, Who redeemed us with His heart's blood. Lo! Here you may read explicitly about woman, that she was the ruin of all mankind. 716

“Then he read to me how Samson lost his hair in his sleep; his sweetheart cut it with her shears, through which treason he lost both his eyes³⁴. Then I tell you he read me about Hercules and his Dejanira³⁵, who caused him to set fire to himself. Nor did he in any

³⁴ Samson. The story of his troubles with Delilah is told in Judges 16. 15 and retold in the Monk's Tale 2015-94.

³⁵ Hercules and his Dejanira. This is retold in the Monk's Tale 2119-35.

way forget the penance and woe which Socrates had with his two wives, how his wife Xantippe cast piss on his head; this blameless man sat still as a stone, wiped his head, and dared say no more than, "before thunder ceases, the rain comes." 732

"Of his cursedness my husband found a relish in the tale of Pasiphae, queen of Crete³⁶. Fie! Speak no more of her horrible lust and desire--it is a grisly thing. He read with good devotion about Clytemnestra³⁷, who for her wantonness treacherously caused her husband's death. He told me also for what cause Amphiarus perished at Thebes; my husband had a legend about his wife Eriphyle, who for a brooch of gold secretly informed the Greeks where her husband had hidden himself; for this reason he met a sorry fate at Thebes. He told me of Livia and Lucilia, who both caused their husbands to die, the one for hate, the other for love. Livia³⁸, late one evening, poisoned her husband, because she had become his foe; the wanton Lucilia³⁹ so loved her husband that she gave him a love-drink, that she might always be in his mind, but of such power that he was dead before morning. 756

"And thus in one way or the other husbands came to sorrow. And then he told me how one Latumius lamented to Arrius, his fellow, how there grew in his garden such a tree on which, he said, his three wives had hanged themselves with desperate heart. 'Oh dear brother, give me a slip from this same blessed tree,' said this Arrius, 'and it shall be planted in my garden!' 764

"He read about wives of later times, some of whom have murdered their husbands in their sleep, and had sex with their lovers while the corpse lay all night flat on the floor. And some have driven nails into their husband's brains while they slept. And some have given them poison in their drink. He spoke more evil than a heart can devise. 773

"And in all this he knew more proverbs than blades of grass grow in this world. He said, 'It is better to have your dwelling with a lion or a foul dragon, than with a woman accustomed to scorning.' 'It is better,' he said, 'to dwell high in the roof, than down in the house with an angry woman; they are so wicked and

³⁶ Pasiphae, queen of Crete. She gave birth to the Minotaur, whose father was a bull.

³⁷ Clytemnestra. Wife of the Greek king Agamemnon, leader of the war effort against the Trojans. When he returned home from war, she and her lover murdered him.

³⁸ Livia. She was convinced by her lover Sejanus to murder her husband.

³⁹ Lucillia. She was married to the Roman poet Lucretius.

contrary that they forever hate what their husbands love.' 781

"He said, 'A woman casts her shame away when she casts off her undergarments.' And furthermore, 'A beautiful woman, unless she is also chaste, is like a gold ring in a sow's nose.' Who would think or imagine the woe and pain in my heart. 787

"And when I saw that he would never leave reading all night in this cursed book, all of the sudden I plucked three leaves out of his book, even as he was reading, and I also struck him on the cheek with my fist so that he fell down backward into our fire. And he started up like a mad lion, and struck me on the head with his fist so that I lay as dead on the floor. 797

"And he was aghast when he saw how still I was, and would have fled on his way, until at last I came out of my swoon. 'Oh, have you slain me, false thief,' I said, 'and have you murdered me thus for my land? Before I die, I will still kiss you.' And he came nearer and kneeled down gently and said, 'Dear sister Alisoun, so God help me, I shall never strike you again! You yourself are to blame for what I have done. Forgive me for it; and I beg you for that.' - And yet again I hit him on the cheek, and said, 'Thief, I am revenged this much. Now I will die; I can speak no more.' 810

"But at last with great pain and grief, we fell into agreement between ourselves. He put the full bridle into my hand, to have the governance of house and estate, and over his tongue and hands as well. And I made him burn his book then and there. 816

"And when I had got for myself all the sovereignty, through a master-stroke, and when he said, 'My own faithful wife, do as you will the rest of your days; be the guard of your honor, and of my dignity also,' we had never a dispute after that day. God help me so, I was as loving to him as any wife between Denmark and India, and as true also; and so was he to me. And I pray to God, Who sits in glory, so bless his soul for His sweet compassion! Now I will relate my story, if you will listen." 828

The Friar, when he had heard all this, laughed and said, "Now, Madame, so may I have joy, this is a long preamble of a tale!" 831

When the Summoner heard the Friar make an outcry, he said, "Lo! By God's two arms! A friar will evermore be meddling. Lo, good men! A fly and a friar will fall into every dish and every affair. Why do

you speak of preambing? What! Amble or trot, or hold your peace and go sit down! You hinder our sport in this way." 839

"Yes, is that what you want, sir Summoner? Now by my faith," said the Friar, "I shall tell, before I go, such a tale or two of a summoner that all the people here shall laugh." 843

"Now, Friar, I curse your face," said this Summoner, "and I curse myself, unless I tell stories, two or three, of friars, before I get to Sittingborne⁴⁰, that shall make your heart grieve, for I know well your patience has already left you." 849

"Peace, and now!" cried our Host; and said, "Let the woman tell her tale. You act like people who are drunk with ale. Please, Madame, tell your tale; and that is best." 853

"All ready, sir, just as you wish," she said, "if I have the permission of this worthy Friar." 855

"Yes, Madame," he said, "tell your tale now, and I will listen." 856

Here ends the Prologue of the Wife of Bath.

Here begins the Tale of the Wife of Bath.

In the old days of King Arthur, of whom Britons speak great glory, this land was entirely filled with fairy power. The elf-queen danced often with her merry company in many green meadows. This long ago was the belief, as I find in books. I speak of many hundred years ago; but in our times no man can see elves any more. 864

For now the great charity and the prayers of begging friars and other holy friars, who, as thick as motes in a sunbeam, reach every land and every stream, blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, bowers, cities, towns, castles, villages, barns, stables, dairies--all this causes there to be no elves. For where a fairy was accustomed to walk, there the begging friar himself walks now, in the mornings or the afternoons, and says his matins⁴¹ and his holy things as he goes along in his begging. Women may go up and down safely; in every bush or under every tree, there is no

⁴⁰ Sittingbourne. Between Rochester and Canterbury; about forty miles from London.

⁴¹ Matins. Morning prayers.

incubus⁴², except him, and he will do nothing but dishonor them. 881

And so it happened that this King Arthur had in his court a lusty young knight, who one day came riding from the river; and it happened that he saw walking ahead of him a maiden, whom he ravished, in spite of all her resistance. For this violation there was such clamor and such appeal to King Arthur, that the knight was condemned by course of law to die; and perhaps the statute in place then was so severe that he would have lost his head, if the queen and other ladies had not so long begged the king for mercy, until he granted him his life at that point, and placed him entirely at the queen's will, to choose whether she would save him or let him die. 898

The queen thanked the king very heartily; and after this, upon a day when she saw the opportunity, she spoke in this way to the knight: "You stand now," she said, "in such a plight that you have even now no assurance of your life. I grant you life, if you can tell me what thing it is that women desire most. Beware, and guard your neck-bone from iron! And if you cannot tell it right now, I will still give you leave to go for twelve months and a day, to search out and learn an answer sufficient for this point. And before you depart, I will have security that you will yield up your body in this place." 912

This knight was woeful, and he sighed sorrowfully. But what! He could not do just as he pleased. And, with such a reply that God would provide for him, at last he chose to depart and come at the very end of the year; and he took his leave and went forth along his way. 918

He sought every house and place where he hoped to find such luck as to learn what women love most. But he could arrive at no coast where he could find two creatures agreeing together on this matter. Some said that women best love riches; some said honor; some said mirth; some, fancy clothes; some, pleasure in bed, and to be widowed often and re-wed. Some said that our hearts are most eased when we be flattered and gratified. 930

They came very near the truth; a man shall best win us by flattery, I will not deny it, and we are caught by attentiveness and diligence, both great and small. And some said how we love best to be free and to do just as we wish, and that no man should reprove us for our faults, but say that we are wise and never

⁴² Incubus. Evil spirit which, according to legend, readily mated with women and usually impregnated them.

foolish at all. For in truth there is nobody among us who will not kick if someone would claw us on a sore place, just because he tells us the truth. Try this, and he shall find it out that it is true. For though we may be full of vice within, we wish to be considered wise and clean of sin. 944

And some said that we have great delight to be accounted stable and trustworthy and steadfast in one purpose, and never reveal what men tell us. But that sort of talk is not worth a rake-handle, by God! We women can conceal nothing. Take witness of Midas. Would you like to hear the tale? 951

Ovid, among other little things, says that Midas had two ass's ears growing upon his head under his long hair, which deformity he hid artfully from every man's sight, as best he could, so that nobody knew of it, except his wife. He loved her most and trusted her; and he asked her to tell of his disfigurement to no creature. She swore to him, "No," not even to gain all the world would she do that villainy and sin, to bring her husband so foul a name; for her own honor she would not do it. 964

But nevertheless she felt she should die, to hide a secret so long; it swelled so sorely about her heart, it seemed to her, that some word needed to burst from her. And since she dared tell it to no human creature, she ran down to a nearby marsh; her heart was ablaze until she arrived there. 971

And as a bittern bumbles in the mire, she laid her mouth down unto the water: "Betray me not, you water, with your sound," she said; "I tell it to you, and to nobody else. My husband has two long ass's ears. Now my heart is whole and well again; now it is out. In very truth I could keep it in no longer." 978

By this you may see that though we wait a time, we can conceal no secret forever; it must come out. If you wish to hear the remainder of the tale, read Ovid⁴³; you can find it out there. 982

This knight, about whom my tale chiefly is, when he saw he could not come by it, that is to say, what women love most--the spirit in his breast was so sorrowful. But home he went, as he could not remain. The day had come when he had to turn homeward. And as he went, deep in care, it happened that he rode under the edge of a forest, where he saw twenty-four ladies and more in a dance. Eagerly he drew toward this dance, in hope of learning some piece of wisdom. But in truth, before he arrived there entirely,

the dance vanished--he did not know where it went. He saw no living creature there, except a woman sitting on the grass--no one could imagine a fouler creature. 999

At the approach of the knight this old woman arose and said, "Sir knight, there is no path that lies this way. Tell me, by your faith, what do you seek? Peradventure it may be better for you; these old people know many things." 1004

"My dear mother," said this knight, "in truth I am just a dead man, unless I can say what thing it is that women desire most. If you could instruct me, I would repay you well for your work." 1008

"Pledge me your word here on my hand," she said, "that you will do the first thing that I require of you, if it should lie in your power; and before it is night I will tell it you." 1012

"Take my pledge here," said the knight, "I agree." 1013

"Then," she said, "I dare to boast that your life is safe; for upon my soul I will guarantee that the queen will say as I do. Show me the proudest of the whole court, who wears a kerchief or other head-dress and who dares say no to what I shall teach you. Let us go on, without further words." Then she whispered a word in his ear, and told him to be glad and have no fear. 1022

When they had arrived at the court, this knight said he had kept his day, as he had promised, and his answer was ready. At that time many noble wives were assembled to hear his answer, and many maidens, and many widows (because they be wise); and the queen herself sat as judge. And then this knight was summoned. 1030

Silence was commanded to every creature, and the knight was ordered to tell in public what thing mortal women most love. This knight stood not like a dumb beast, but without delay answered the question with manly voice, so that all the court heard it. 1036

"My liege lady, over all this world" he said, "women wish to have sovereignty as well over her husband as her love, and to have mastery over him. This is your greatest desire, though you may slay me for this. Do as you wish; I am here at your will." 1042

In all the court there was neither wife nor maiden nor widow to contradict what he replied, but all declared he was worthy to have his freedom. And at that word,

⁴³ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Book 11, ll. 100ff.

the old woman, whom the knight had seen sitting on the grass, started up. 1047

"Mercy, my sovereign lady!" she said. "Do me justice, before your court departs. I taught the knight this answer, for which he pledged me his word that he would do the first thing I should require of him, if it lay in his power. Before the court, then, I pray you, sir knight," she said, "that you take me as your wife; for you well know that I have saved your life. If I speak falsely, say no to me, upon your faith!" 1057

This knight answered, "Alas and alack! I know full well that this was my promise. But for the love of God, please choose another request! Take all my goods, and let my body go." 1061

"No, then," she answered, "I curse us both. For though I may be ugly, poor, and old, I would like none of all the metal or ore that is buried under the earth or lies upon it, only that I would be your wife, and your love also." 1066

"My love!" he said, "No, my damnation! Alas that any of my kindred should be so foully disgraced by such a match!" 1069

But all this was for nothing. This is the conclusion, that he was constrained, and had to wed her. And he took his old wife and went to bed. 1072

Now perhaps some men would say that through my negligence I take no care to tell you all the joy and all the preparations that there were at the celebration that day. To this point I shall briefly answer, and say there was no joy nor celebration at all; but only heaviness and much sorrow. For he wedded her secretly the next morning. And he was so miserable that he hid himself the rest of the day like an owl, as his wife looked so ugly. 1082

Great was his misery when he was alone with his wife; he tossed about and turned back and forth. His old wife lay always smiling, and said, "Ah, God bless, dear husband! Does every knight act this way with his wife? Is this the way of King Arthur's household? Is every knight of his so hard to please? I am your own love and your wife also, and I have saved your life, and surely, I have never yet done you any wrong. Why do act this way on this first night? You act like a man who has lost his wit. What is my guilt? Tell me, for the love of God, and if I have the power, it shall be amended."

"Amended!" said this knight. "Alas! No, no! It can not be amended forevermore! You are so loathly and

so old, and come of so low a lineage as well, that it is small wonder that I toss and turn. I wish to God my heart would burst!"

'Is this,' she said, 'the cause of your unrest?' 1104

'Yes, certainly, and no wonder,' he said. 1105

"Now, sir," she replied, "I could amend all this before three days had passed, if I wish, so that you might bear yourself toward me well. 1108

"But when you speak of such gentility⁴⁴ as is descended from ancient wealth--so that you knights should therefore would be gentlemen of breeding--such arrogance is not worth a hen. Look who is always most virtuous, openly and secretly, and most inclines to do what gentle deeds he can; take him for the gentlest man. Christ wishes that we claim our gentility from Him, not from our ancestors' ancient wealth. For though all their heritage of our ancestors, by reason of which we claim high rank, may descend to us, yet they cannot at all bequeath to any of us their virtuous living, which made them to be called gentle men and to bid us follow to them and do in like manner. 1124

The wise poet of Florence, who is named Dante, speaks well on this matter. Lo, this is what Dante's says in his poetry: "Seldom does a man climb to excellence on his own slim branches, for God, from his goodness, wills that we claim or gentility from Him." For we may claim nothing from our ancestors, except for temporal things that can be injured and impaired. 1133

"Every creature also knows this as well as I, that if gentility were planted by nature in a certain family all down the line, openly and privately, then they would never cease to do the fair duties of gentility; they could never do any base or vicious deed. Take fire and bear it into the darkest house between here and the mount of Caucasus, and let the doors be shut and leave that place. Nevertheless the fire will burn and blaze as fairly as though twenty thousand men witnessed it; on peril of my life, it will keep to its natural duty until it dies. 1145

"Here you may well see how nobility hangs not from ancient possessions, since people do not always perform its works, as does the fire, according to its nature. For, God knows, one may often see a lord's son do vicious and shameful deeds; and he who wishes to be esteemed for his gentility because he

⁴⁴ Gentility. Nobility.

was born of a noble house and had virtuous and noble ancestors, and yet himself will not perform the deeds of gentility nor follow after his gentle ancestor who is dead, he is not gentle, even if he is a duke or an earl; for base and sinful deeds make a commoner. For gentility then would be nothing but renown of your ancestors for their high worthiness, which is something that has nothing to do with you. Your gentility comes only from God. Then our true gentility comes from divine grace, and was in no fashion bequeathed to us with our earthly station. 1164

“Think how noble was that Tullius Hostilius⁴⁵, as Valerius⁴⁶ tells, who rose out of poverty to high nobility. Read Seneca⁴⁷, and Boethius⁴⁸ as well; there you shall see expressly that he who does noble deeds is noble. And therefore, dear husband, I conclude in this way: albeit my ancestors were untutored, yet may the high God--and so I hope--grant me grace to live virtuously. Then I am noble, when I begin to live virtuously and to abandon evil. 1176

“And you reproach me for poverty; but the high God on whom we believe chose freely to live in poverty. And surely every man, maiden, or wife, may well know that Jesus, King of Heaven, would not choose a wicked manner of living. Truly cheerful poverty is an honorable thing, so will Seneca say, and other clerks. Whoever keeps himself content with his poverty, I count as rich, even if he does not have not a shirt! He who covets is a poor creature, for he wishes to have that which is not within his power. But he who has nothing, nor covets things, is rich, albeit you count him as only a serving-lad. 1190

“True poverty sings a song of its own. Concerning poverty, Juvenal says merrily:
“The poor man, when he goes along the way,
Before the thieves, he can still sing and play.”
Poverty is a hateful good, I suppose, a great remover from the busyness of the world, and a great teacher of wisdom to one who takes it in patience. All this is poverty, though it may seem wretched; and a possession that no creature will challenge. When a man is humbled, often poverty allows him to know his God and himself as well. It seems to me that poverty is a magnifying glass through which he may

⁴⁵ Tullius Hostilius. According to legend, he rose to become the third king of Rome.

⁴⁶ Valerius. Valerius Maximus, a Roman author of a collection of commonplace anecdotes.

⁴⁷ Seneca. Roman author. [Epistle] 44.

⁴⁸ Boethius. Late Roman philosopher, author of the influential *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated.

see who his true friends are. And therefore, sir, I pray, so that I will not grieve you, scorn me no more for my poverty. 1206

“Now, sir, you reproach me for my old age. And surely, sir, though there may be no authority in any book to tell you so, yet you honorable gentlefolk say that men should do courtesy to an old creature, and for your gentle manners call him Father. And I could find authorities to show this, I believe. 1212

“Now you say I am old and foul: then have no fear that you will be a cuckold. For ugliness and age, upon my life, are great wardens over chastity. But nevertheless, since I know your delight, I shall fulfill your appetite. 1218

“Choose,” she said, “one of these two things: to have me foul and old until I die, and to you a true, humble wife, never in all my days displeasing you; or else to have me young and beautiful, and take your chance on how many visits there will be to your house--or perhaps to some other place--which will be for my sake. Now choose yourself which one you will have.” 1227

This knight thought hard about it and sighed deeply; but at last he spoke in this manner: “My lady and love, and my dear wife, I put myself into your wise governance. Please choose which may be the greatest pleasure and greatest honor to you and me also; I care not which of the two, for it is sufficient to me to please you.” 1235

“Then I have the mastery over you,” she said, “since I may choose and govern as I wish” 1237

“Yes, surely, wife,” he said; “I believe that is for the best.” 1238

“Kiss me,” she said, “we will be angered no longer. For by my faith I will be both unto you--that is to say, both beautiful, yes, and good. I pray to God that I may die mad, but I would be as good and faithful as ever a wife was since the world was new. And if I am not as beautiful to see in the morning as any lady, queen or empress, between the east and the west, do with my life and death as you will. Lift up the curtain, and look how it is.” 1249

And when the knight saw truly that she was so fair and so young, he clasped her in his two arms for joy, his heart bathed in a bath of bliss. A thousand times in a row he kissed her. And she obeyed him in all that might cause him delight or pleasure. 1256

And thus they lived in perfect joy to the end of their
lives. And may Jesus Christ send us husbands meek,
young, and lusty, and grace to outlive them that we
wed. 1260

And I pray Jesus also to shorten their days that will
not be ruled by their wives. And old, angry misers--
may God send them a true pestilence soon! 1264

Here ends the Wife of Bath's Tale.

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