

The Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale

"Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, would be enough for me
To speak of woe that married life affords;
For since I was twelve years of age, my lords,
Thanks be to God eternally alive, 5
Of husbands at the church door I've had five
(If I have wed that often legally),
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But I was told not very long ago
That as but once did Jesus ever go 10
To a wedding (in Cana, Galilee),
By that example he was teaching me
That only once in life should I be wed.
And listen what a sharp word, too, was said
Beside a well by Jesus, God and man, 15
In a reproof of the Samaritan:
'Now you have had five husbands,' Jesus said,
'But he who has you now, I say instead,
Is not your husband.' That he said, no doubt,
But what he meant I haven't figured out; 20
For I must ask, why is it the fifth man
Wasn't husband to the Samaritan?
How many men was she allowed to wed?
In all my years I've never heard it said
Exactly how this number is defined; 25
Men may surmise and gloss how it's divined,
But I expressly know it's not a lie
God bade us to increase and multiply--
That noble text I well appreciate.
I also know the Lord said that my mate 30
Should leave for me his father and his mother,
But mentioned not one number or another,
Not bigamy nor yet octogamy.
Why should men speak, then, disapprovingly?
"Look, here's the wise king, lordly Solomon: 35
I do believe his wives were more than one.
Would that the Lord permitted me to be
Refreshed as half as often as was he.
A gift from God he had for all his wives,
No man will ever have such in our lives. 40
God knows, this noble king, if I am right,
Had many a merry bout on that first night
With each of them, he was so much alive.
And God be blest that I have married five,
Of which I have picked out the very best, 44A
Both for their hanging purse and for their chest.
As many different schools make perfect [clerks](#),
So practice that's diverse in sundry works
Will make a perfect workman certainly;
Five-husband schooling's done the same for me. 44F
The sixth is welcome when he comes along; 45
I won't be keeping myself chaste for long,
For when one husband from this world is gone
Some Christian man will wed me early on--
For as the [Apostle](#) says, then I am free

To wed in God's name when it pleases me. 50
 It's no sin to be married, he has said,
 For if you're burning, better to be wed.
 What do I care if folks speak evilly
 Of curséd Lamech and his bigamy?
 A holy man was Abraham, I know, 55
 And Jacob, too, as far as that may go,
 Yet each with more than two wives came to dwell,
 Like many other holy men as well.
 And where in any age can it be said
 That God on high forebade that we be wed 60
 By any word express? Please answer me.
 Or when did he command virginity?
 I know as well as you, for there's no doubt,
 When maidenhood the Apostle spoke about
 He said he had no precept. To be sure, 65
 A woman may be counseled to be pure,
 But counsel and commandment aren't the same.
 To leave it to our judgment was his aim.
 For if God did command virginity,
 Then marriage he condemned concurrently; 70
 And surely if no seed were ever sown,
 From where then would virginity be grown?
 Paul wouldn't dare command, would least invoke
 A thing on which his Master never spoke.
 A prize is set up for virginity: 75
 Who runs the best may have it, let us see.
 "But not for all is this word seen as right,
 It's only as God wills it in his might.
 The Apostle was a virgin, well I note;
 But nonetheless, although he said and wrote 80
 That he wished everyone would be as he,
 It was but to advise virginity.
 He allows I be a wife, if that's my place,
 In his indulgence, so it's no disgrace
 To marry if my latest mate should die-- 85
 Without the 'bigamy' that some would cry.
 'It's best a man should not a woman touch';
 He meant in bed or on the couch or such.
 In mixing fire and tinder danger lies;
 What this example means you realize. 90
 And that's the sum: he held virginity
 Was better than to wed in frailty.
 (I call it 'frailty' unless the two
 Would chaste remain till both their lives were through.)
 "I grant it well, but envy I do not, 95
 That maidenhood may be the better lot.
 In soul and body some like being clean,
 And I can make no boasts. But have you seen
 Among possessions that the nobles hold
 If each and every vessel is of gold? 100
 Some are of service though they be of wood.
 In sundry ways God calls us to his good,
 Each by his own God-given gift sustained,
 Some this, some that, as heaven has ordained.
 "A great perfection is virginity, 105
 And continence maintained devotedly;

But Christ, who of perfection is the well,
 Did not bid everyone to go and sell
 All that he had and give it to the poor
 And thereby follow him; no, this was for 110
 The ones desiring to live perfectly--
 And by your leave, my lords, that isn't me.
 For I'll bestow the flower of my life
 In all the acts and fruits of being wife.

"And tell me for what reason, if you can, 115
 Were organs made for reproducing man
 Who's made in such a wise and perfect way?
 They were not made for nothing, safe to say.
 Gloss over whoso will, tell all creation
 Our little things both are for urination, 120
 And that they're made so different in detail
 So we can know the female from the male
 And for no other reason--you say 'No'?
 Experience knows well it isn't so.
 That learned men I not provoke to oath, 125
 I mean to say that they were made for both--
 That is, both for relief and for our ease
 To procreate, so God we not displease.
 Why else should men into their ledgers set
 That every man yield to his wife her debt? 130
 And how can he pay this emolument
 Unless he use his simple instrument?
 That's why upon all creatures these are set,
 To urinate and also to beget.

"But I don't say that everyone possessing 135
 Equipment such as this as I was stressing
 Must go and use it for engendering,
 Lest chastity be held a worthless thing.
 Christ was a virgin though shaped as a man,
 And many a saint since this world first began 140
 Has also lived in perfect chastity.
 I don't begrudge them their virginity;
 They're bread from finest wheat, so be it said,
 And let us wives be known as barley bread.
 And yet with barley bread, as Mark can tell, 145
 Was many a man by Jesus nourished well.
 In such estate as God calls each of us
 I'll persevere. I'm not fastidious,
 In wifhood I will use my instrument
 As freely as my Maker has it sent. 150
 If I hold back, God bring me misery!
 My spouse shall have it day and night, when he
 Desires he may come forth and pay his debt.
 I'll have a husband--I'm not quitting yet--
 And he will be my debtor and my slave, 155
 And in the flesh his troubles will be grave
 As long as I continue as his wife;
 For I will have the power all my life
 Over his body, I and never he.
 It's just as the Apostle said to me 160
 And bade them love us well, which I must say
 Are teachings to my liking all the way."

The [Pardoner](#) spoke up immediately.

"Now dame, by God and by Saint John," said he,
 "As a noble preacher on the case you'll pass. 165
 I almost wed a wife, but then, alas,
 Why buy it with my flesh, a price so dear?
 I'd rather not get married, not this year."
 "Abide," she said, "my tale is not begun!
 No, you'll be drinking from another tun, 170
 Before I'm through, that tastes much worse than ale.
 And when I'm finished telling you my tale
 Of tribulation known to man and wife--
 Of which I've been an expert all my life
 (That is to say, of which I've been the whip)-- 175
 Then make your choice whether you would sip
 From this same tun that I'm about to broach.
 Be wary lest too near it you approach.
 I'll tell you good examples, more than ten.
 'Whoso would not be warned by other men, 180
 By him shall other men corrected be.'
 These words were written by [Ptolemy](#),
 You'll find it if you read his [Almagest](#)."
 "Dame, if you will, I prayerfully request,"
 The Pardoner said, "that just as you began 185
 Tell us your tale and do not spare a man
 And of your practice teach us younger men."
 "If you desire, I'll do so gladly, then,"
 She said. "But first I pray this company,
 If I should speak as it may fancy me, 190
 Will not be too upset by what I say,
 For my intent is nothing but to play.
 "My lords, I now will offer you my tale.
 If ever I may drink of wine or ale,
 I'll tell the truth on husbands that I've had, 195
 As three of them were good and two were bad.
 The three men who were good were rich and old,
 Indeed were scarcely able to uphold
 The contract binding them. By God above,
 You know exactly what I'm speaking of. 200
 So help me God, I laugh to think, all right,
 How pitifully I made them work all night,
 Though, by my faith, it meant not much to me;
 They gave me so much of their treasury
 I didn't need to practice diligence 205
 To win their love or show them reverence.
 For they loved me so well, by God above,
 That I put little value in their love.
 The woman's wise who's busy till she's won
 The love she wants, or she'll be left with none. 210
 But since I had them wholly in my hand
 And they had given to me all their land,
 Why should I pay them heed and try to please,
 Unless it were for profit and for ease?
 But by my faith, I worked them for so long 215
 That many a night they sang a plaintive song.
 The bacon wasn't fetched for them, I know,
 Like for some men in Essex at [Dunmow](#).
 I governed them so strictly by my law
 That each of them was happy to a flaw 220

To bring me back some nice things from the fair,
 And glad when I would speak with pleasant air,
 For God knows I would chide them spitefully.
 "Now hear how well I bore myself, and see,
 The wise among you wives who understand, 225
 How you should speak: accuse them out of hand.
 There's no man who can falsely swear and lie
 As half as boldly as a woman. I
 Don't say this to those wives already wise,
 Save when they've made mistakes--then I advise 230
 That she who knows what's good for her and bad
 Must prove the chough has gone stark raving mad
 And call as witness her assenting maid.
 Now listen to my typical tirade:
 "Old sluggard, you would have me dress this way? 235
 Why does my neighbor's wife have fine array?
 She is so honored everywhere she goes;
 I sit at home, I have no nifty clothes.
 What are you up to at my neighbor's house?
 Is she so fair? So amorous are you, spouse? 240
 What do you whisper with our maid? Ah, bless me!
 Sir Lecher, will you stop your treachery!
 Yet if I have a confidant or friend
 In innocence, you chide me to no end
 If I so much as walk into his house. 245
 You come home just as drunken as a mouse
 And preach upon your bench. Bad luck to you!
 You say to me that it's a mighty rue
 To marry one who's poor, for the expense;
 And if she's rich and highborn, you commence 250
 To talk about the torment and the folly
 Of suffering all her pride and melancholy.
 And if she's fair, you thorough knave, you say
 That every lecher wants her right away,
 That she'll not long in chastity abide 255
 When she's assailed on each and every side.
 "You say that some desire us for our fortunes,
 Some for our looks, some for our good proportions,
 And some because she either sings or dances,
 Some for her noble blood and flirty glances, 260
 Her hands and arms so graceful--without fail
 All go right to the devil by your tale.
 You say that men can't keep a castle wall
 That's swarmed upon as long, that it will fall.
 "If she looks foul, then you declare that she 265
 Will lust for every fellow she may see,
 Leap on him like a spaniel in a trice
 Until she finds the man who'll pay her price.
 In all the lake there's not one goose so gray
 That it will be without a mate, you say. 270
 Yet it's a hard thing, you would have it known,
 To have what no man willingly would own
 (You say it, loafer, when you go to bed),
 And that a wise man has no need to wed
 Nor any man whose aim is heaven's wonder. 275
 May lightning and a bolt of wildest thunder
 Come break your withered neck with fiery stroke!

"'You say a house that leaks, and also smoke,
 And wives who scold, cause men to run away
 From their own homes. Ah, *benedicite!* 280
 What ails such an old fellow so to chide?

"'You say we wives all of our vices hide
 Until we wed, and then we let them show.
 The proverb of a rascal whom I know!

"'You say the ox, the ass, the hound, the horse 285
 At various times are tested, as, of course,
 Are bowls and basins ere a buy is made,
 And spoons and stools, and other household trade
 Like pots and clothes, and other such array;
 But menfolk never test their wives, you say, 290
 Till they are wed--old dotard, ne'er do well!--
 And then we show our vices, so you tell.

"'And it displeases me, you also say,
 If you don't praise my beauty all the day
 And aren't forever poring on my face 295
 And calling me "fair dame" in every place;
 If you don't hold a feast upon the day
 When I was born, dress me in rich array;
 If you don't honor with all due respect
 My nurse and chambermaid, nor deem select 300
 All of my father's kinfolk and allies--
 You say it, you old barrel full of lies!

"'And our apprentice Jenkin, by his hair--
 Those curly, golden, shining locks so fair--
 And by the fact he squires me where I go, 305
 Gives you a false suspicion. Kindly know
 I wouldn't want him if you died tomorrow.

"'But tell me this, why hide (be it your sorrow!)
 The keys from me that lock your chest? I'll tell
 You this, your property is mine as well. 310
 Am I an idiot like some other dames?
 I tell you by that lord they call Saint James,
 You won't be--you can rave mad in the woods!--
 Master of both my body and my goods;
 You'll forgo one, I tell you to your eye. 315
 What help is it to ask around and spy?
 I think that you would lock me in your chest.
 To say, "Go where you please, wife," would be best,
 "Have fun, I won't believe tales told in malice,
 For I know you to be a good wife, Alice." 320
 We love no man who keeps such watchful eyes
 On where we go, our liberty we prize.

"'Above all men may he most blessed be,
 That wise astronomer Ptolemy,
 Who wrote this proverb in his *Almagest*: 325
 "He has much higher wisdom than the rest
 Who doesn't care who has the world in hand."
 And by this proverb you should understand
 That if you have enough, why should you care
 How merrily some other people fare? 330
 For by your leave, old dotard, of my stuff
 Tonight you surely will have quite enough.
 How great a niggard is he who refuses
 A candlelight from the lantern that he uses;

He'd have no less light than he did before. 335
 You have enough, so don't complain for more.
 "And if in finest clothes, you also say,
 In jewelry and other fine display,
 We dress ourselves, we risk our chastity;
 To back up what you say, you quote to me 340
 The following in the Apostle's name:
 "Clothes chastely made with proper sense of shame
 Is what your women's dress should always be--
 No fancy hairdos, no bright jewelry
 Like pearls and gold, nor other rich array." 345
 About your text and rubric, let me say
 I'd follow them as much as would a gnat.
 "You also say that I am like a cat,
 For if somebody singes a cat's fur
 She'll be content to stay inside and purr, 350
 But if her fur is sleek and fine she'll stay
 Inside the house not more than half a day;
 Before the dawn can break she's to her calling,
 She's showing off her fur and caterwauling--
 In other words, Sir Rascal, if well dressed 355
 I run out to be sure I'm well assessed.
 "Old fool, what help to you are all your spies?
 If you asked [Argus](#) with his hundred eyes
 To be my bodyguard--what better measure?--
 He'd guard me only if it were my pleasure; 360
 As I may thrive, I'd really tweak his beard!
 "You also speak of three things to be feared
 For troubling all the earth, and that for sure
 The fourth one there's no man could long endure.
 Sir Rascal dear, may Christ cut short your life, 365
 For still you preach and say a hateful wife
 Is one of these misfortunes. Sir, are there
 No other things to speak of and compare
 In telling all your parables? Must you
 Always include a poor wife ere you're through? 370
 "You also liken woman's love to hell,
 To barren land without a stream or well,
 And also to a wildly raging fire--
 The more it burns, the stronger its desire
 To consume all that will burn. You say to me 375
 That just as little worms destroy a tree
 A wife destroys her husband. "They have found
 This to be true, those who to wives are bound."
 "My lords, just so, as you now understand,
 I accused all my old husbands out of hand 380
 Of saying such while they were drunk. And all
 Was false, but as my witnesses I'd call
 On Jenkin and my niece to say, 'It's so.'
 O Lord, the pain I gave them and the woe!
 Their guilt? By God's sweet grief, they hadn't any; 385
 And yet just like a horse I'd bite and whinny,
 Complaining well when I myself had guilt,
 For they'd have killed me had the beans been spilt.
 Who comes first to the mill is first to grind;
 I'd be first to complain, and always find 390
 Our war was quickly over--gladly they

Repented things they didn't do or say.
 On wenches I would give them reprimand
 When they were so sick they could hardly stand.

"Yet each was tickled in his heart to see 395
 What he thought was such love for him in me.
 I swore that all my walking out by night
 Was just to keep his wenches in my sight.
 With that excuse I had me lots of mirth.
 For we are given such keen wits at birth 400
 To cheat and weep and spin; these God will give
 To women naturally long as they live.
 So one thing I can speak of boastfully,
 The one who came out best was always me,
 By sleight or force, or by some other thing 405
 Like long complaint and constant bickering.
 Especially in bed were they undone,
 For there I'd scold them and deny them fun;
 I would no longer in the bed abide,
 Once I could feel his arm upon my side, 410
 Until he paid his ransom as he must--
 Then I would suffer him to do his lust.
 And so to every man I tell this tale:
 Gain what you can, for everything's for sale,
 And no hawk by an empty hand is lured. 415
 For profit all his lust I so endured
 And feigned for him a lusty appetite;
 In bacon, though, I never took delight,
 And that is why I would forever chide.
 For even had the pope sat down beside 420
 Them there, I wouldn't spare them at the table,
 To pay back word for word I was so able.
 So help me God who is omnipotent,
 Were I to make right now my testament
 I'd owe them not a word that's not repaid. 425
 I did this by the wits that I displayed
 So that they had to give up and be bested
 Or else we never would have finally rested.
 Though like a raging lion he would look,
 Yet he would fail at every tack he took. 430

"Then I would say, 'Good dear, just take a peep
 At how meek-looking Wilkin is, our sheep;
 Come here, my spouse, and let me kiss your cheek;
 You should always be patient, always meek,
 And have a good man's conscience, as so much 435
 You like to preach of patient Job and such.
 Be always patient, since so well you preach--
 If not, a lesson we will have to teach,
 How fair it is to have a wife in peace,
 For there's no doubt that one of us must cease; 440
 Since woman's less reasonable than the male,
 You must therefore be patient. What can ail
 You, husband, that so much you gripe and groan?
 Is it my thing? You'd have it yours alone?
 Why, take it all, here, take it every bit. 445
 By Peter, curse you! such a love for it.
 If I were selling some of my [belle chose](#)
 I then could walk fresh-looking as a rose,

But I will keep it for your own sweet tooth.
 You are to blame, by God, and that's the truth.' 450
 "The words we'd have were always of that sort.
 And now on my fourth husband I'll report.
 "A reveler was husband number four,
 That is to say, he had a paramour.
 And I was young and wanton, passionate, 455
 As jolly as a magpie, obstinate
 And strong. How I could dance to a small harp, too,
 And sing like any nightingale can do
 When I had drunk a draught of good sweet wine!
 Metellius, that dirty churl, the swine, 460
 Picked up a staff and took his spouse's life
 For drinking wine. If I had been his wife,
 He never would have daunted me from drinking!
 And after wine, on [Venus](#) I'd be thinking,
 For as surely as cold engenders hail 465
 A lustful mouth will have a lustful tail.
 A tipsy woman is without defense,
 As lechers know by their experience.
 "But Lord Christ! when it all comes back to me,
 Remembrance of my youth and jollity, 470
 It warms the cockles of my heart. Today
 It still does my heart good that I can say
 I've had the world, what time's been mine to pass.
 But age that poisons everything, alas,
 Bereft me of my beauty and my pith. 475
 Well, let it go, the devil go therewith!
 The flour is gone, there is no more to tell;
 The bran as best I can I now must sell
 And strive to be as merry as before.
 And now I'll tell of husband number four. 480
 "I had within my heart a great despite
 That he in any other took delight.
 I paid him back, by God and by Saint Joyce,
 With a hard staff from wood of his own choice;
 Not with my body, not by sinful means, 485
 But entertaining folks in merry scenes,
 I made him fry in his own grease till he
 Was quite consumed with angry jealousy.
 By God, on earth I was his purgatory,
 For which I hope his soul is now in glory. 490
 God knows how often he would sit and sing
 While his shoe pinched him, such a painful thing;
 For there was none save God and me who knew
 The many torments that I put him through.
 He died when I came from Jerusalem; 495
 Beneath the rood-beam where we buried him,
 His tomb was surely not as finely done
 As was great King Darius's, the one
 Built by Apelles with such skill and taste.
 A costly burial would have been a waste. 500
 May he fare well and God give his soul rest,
 For he's now in his grave, his wooden chest.
 "Of husband number five I now will tell.
 God grant his soul may never go to hell!
 And yet he was to me the very worst; 505

I feel it in my ribs from last to first
 And always will until the day I die.
 But in our bed he was so fresh and spry,
 To gloss away so able, heaven knows,
 Whenever he was wanting my *belle chose*, 510
 That though each bone he'd beaten was in pain,
 At once he'd win back all my love again.
 I swear I loved him best of all, for he
 Was always playing hard to get with me.
 We women have--the truth, so help me God-- 515
 In this regard a fancy that is odd;
 That which we can't get in an easy way
 Is what we'll crave and cry for all the day.
 Forbid us something and then we'll desire it,
 But press it on us and we'll not require it. 520
 With coyness we trade in our affairs;
 Great market crowds make more expensive wares
 And what's too cheap will not be held a prize.
 This every woman knows if she is wise.
 "My husband number five, God bless his soul, 525
 I took for love, no riches were my goal.
 He once had been an Oxford clerk, but then
 Had left school and gone home, and boarded in
 Our town with a good friend of mine, the one,
 God bless her soul, whose name was Alison. 530
 She knew my heart, each of my secrets well,
 Much better than the parish priest. I'd tell
 Her everything, disclosing to her all;
 For had my husband pissed upon a wall
 Or done something that could have cost his life, 535
 To her and to another worthy wife--
 And also to my niece, whom I loved well--
 His every secret I would fully tell.
 God knows, I did this so much, to his dread,
 It often made his face get hot and red. 540
 He felt ashamed, but blamed himself that he
 Had told to me so great a privity.
 "It so befell that one time during Lent,
 As often to this close friend's house I went
 (And I so loved to dress up anyway 545
 And take my walks in March, April, and May
 From house to house, to hear what tales were spun),
 This clerk named Jenkin, my friend Alison,
 And I myself into the meadows went.
 My husband was in London all that Lent, 550
 So I had much more leisure time to play,
 To see and to be seen along the way
 By lusty folks. How could I know when there
 Would come good fortune meant for me, or where?
 And so I made my visits, I'd attend 555
 Religious vigils and processions, wend
 With pilgrims, hear the sermons preached; also
 To miracle plays and weddings I would go.
 The clothes that I would wear were scarlet bright;
 There never was a worm or moth or mite, 560
 As I may live, could bring to them abuse.
 Do you know why? They always were in use.

"I'll tell you now what happened next to me.
 I've said we walked into the fields, we three;
 And there we really had a chance to flirt, 565
 This clerk and I. My foresight to assert,
 While we were talking I suggested he,
 If I wound up a widow, marry me.
 For certainly--I say it not to boast--
 Of good purveyance I have made the most 570
 In marriages and other things as well.
 A mouse's heart's not worth a leek in hell
 If he has just one hole for which to run,
 For if that one hole fails then all is done.

"I made pretense that he enchanted me 575
 (My mother taught to me this subtlety);
 I dreamt of him all night, I also said,
 And dreamt he slew me as I lay in bed,
 My bed as full of blood as it could be.
 'But still I hope that you'll bring good to me, 580
 For blood betokens gold, or so I'm taught.'
 And all was false, for I'd been dreaming naught,
 I only followed all my mother's lore
 (On that as well as on a few things more).

"And now, sirs--let me see, what was I saying? 585
 Aha! by God, I have it, no more straying.

"When my fourth husband lay upon the bier,
 I wept, of course, grief-stricken to appear,
 As wives must do (the custom of the land),
 And hid my face with the kerchief in my hand. 590
 But as I'd be provided with a mate,
 I wept but little, I can truly state.

"Now as my husband to the church was borne
 That morning, neighbors went along to mourn,
 With our clerk Jenkin being one. As God 595
 May help me, when I saw him trod
 Behind the bier, I thought that he had feet
 And legs as fair as ever I could meet,
 And all my heart was then in his dear hold.
 He was, I think, then twenty winters old, 600
 And I was forty, telling you the truth;
 But I have always had a coltish tooth.
 Gap-toothed I was, and that was for the best;
 The birthmark of Saint Venus I possessed.
 So help me God, I was a lusty one 605
 And fair and rich and young and full of fun;
 And truly, as my husbands said to me,
 I had the finest what's-it there could be.
 My feelings come from Venus and my heart
 Is full of Mars; for Venus did impart 610
 To me all of my lecherousness and lust,
 And Mars gave me a hard and sturdy crust.
 My ascendant sign was Taurus, Mars therein.
 Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
 For I have always followed inclination 615
 By virtue of my taurine constellation;
 That made me so that I could not deny
 A good fellow my Venus chamber. I
 Still have the mark of Mars upon my face

(And also in another, private place). 620
As truly as the Lord is my salvation,
My love was never by discrimination;
I always catered to my appetite,
Though he be short or long or black or white.
I didn't care, just so he pleased me, 625
How poor he was or what was his degree.

"What shall I say except, when that month ended,
This jolly Jenkin whom I thought so splendid
Had married me midst great solemnity.
I gave him all the land and property 630
That ever had been given me. And yet
It was thereafter much to my regret;
Of nothing that I wanted he would hear.
By God, he struck me so once on the ear
(Because I tore a page out of his book) 635
That it went deaf from that one blow it took.
But I was stubborn like a lioness
And lashed him with my tongue without redress.
And I'd go walking as I'd done before
From house to house (though I would not, he swore), 640
For which he oftentimes would start to preach
To me. Old Roman stories he would teach,
Like how Simplicius Gallus left his wife,
Forsaking her the remainder of his life,
Because he caught her looking out the door 645
One day bareheaded--that and nothing more.

"A Roman, too, he told me of by name
Whose wife had gone out to a summer's game
Without his knowledge; he forsook her too.
And then he'd go and search his Bible through 650
For a proverb of Ecclesiasticus
Wherein he gives a firm command to us:
No man should let his wife go roam about.
And after that he'd quote without a doubt:
'Whoever builds his house by using shallows 655
And goes and pricks his blind horse over fallows
And lets his wife seek any shrine one hallows
Is worthy to be hung upon the gallows!'
But all for naught, for I cared not a straw
For all his proverbs or for his old saw. 660
I'd not correct myself by his advices.
I hate a man who tells me of my vices,
And so do more of us, God knows, than I.
So mad with me this made him he could die,
But I would not forbear in any case. 665

"I'll tell you, by Saint Thomas, face-to-face
The reason I tore from his book a page,
Why he gave me a deaf ear in his rage.

"He had a book that he read night and day
For his amusement. He would laugh away 670
At this book, which he called 'Valerius
And Theophrastus,' with its various
Selections: there was once a clerk in Rome,
A cardinal whose name was Saint Jerome,
Who wrote a book against Jovinian; 675
This book also contained Tertullian,

Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise,
 An abbess who once lived near Paris; these
 Along with parables of Solomon
 And [Ovid](#)'s *Art*--the books were many a one, 680
 And all of them in this one volume bound.
 And day and night he always could be found,
 When he had leisure or was on vacation
 From any sort of worldly occupation,
 Reading some passage about wicked wives. 685
 Of them he knew more legends and more lives
 Than of the best of wives in Holy Writ.
 It is impossible, no doubting it,
 For any clerk to speak some good of wives
 Unless it deals with saints, their holy lives; 690
 No woman not a saint he's kindly to.
 Who painted, though, the lion, tell me who?
 By God, if women ever wrote some stories
 As clerks have done in all their oratories,
 They would have told of men more wickedness 695
 Than all the sons of Adam could redress.
 Children of Venus and of [Mercury](#)
 Have always worked in great polarity;
 For Mercury loves wisdom, science pure,
 While Venus loves good times, expenditure. 700
 Because their dispositions are divergent,
 One's descendant, the other one emergent;
 So Mercury, God knows, has desolation
 When Venus has in Pisces exaltation,
 And Venus falls when Mercury is raised. 705
 So by no clerk is woman ever praised.
 The clerk, when he is old and cannot do
 For Venus any work worth his old shoe,
 Will in his dotage sit and write of how
 A woman cannot keep her marriage vow! 710
 "Now let me tell the reason why I say
 That I was beaten for a book, I pray.
 One night this Jenkin, who was my fifth sire,
 Was reading in his book beside the fire.
 He read of Eve, who by her wickedness 715
 Had brought all of mankind to wretchedness,
 The reason Jesus Christ himself was slain
 To bring us back with his heart's blood again.
 'Of women here expressly you may find
 That woman was the ruin of all mankind.' 720
 "He read to me how Samson lost his hair,
 Sheared by his mistress, sleeping unaware,
 And how by this he lost both of his eyes.
 "He read then to me--I will tell no lies--
 Of Dejanira, she who was to blame 725
 That Hercules had set himself aflame.
 "He left out not a whit about the woe
 That Socrates' two wives caused him to know;
 When Xantippe poured piss upon his head,
 The hapless man sat there as still as dead, 730
 Then wiped his head and dared not to complain,
 But said, 'Ere thunder stops, there comes a rain.'
 "The tale of Pasiphaë, the queen of Crete,

For cursedness he thought was really sweet.
 Fie on it! I'll not speak in any measure 735
 About her horrid lust, her grisly pleasure.
 "Of Clytemnestra, who for lechery
 Brought to her husband death by treachery,
 With greatest fervor then to me he read.
 "He told me, too, the circumstance that led 740
 Amphiaraus at Thebes to lose his life;
 My husband had a legend of his wife
 Eriphyle, who for a brooch of gold
 Had gone in secret to the Greeks and told
 Of where her husband had his hiding place, 745
 For which he met at Thebes with sorry grace.
 "He told of Livia, Lucilia too,
 Who made their husbands die, albeit true
 One was for love, the other was for hate.
 For Livia, one evening very late, 750
 Gave poison to her husband as a foe;
 But lecherous Lucilia loved hers so
 That, so he might forever of her think,
 She gave him such a love potion to drink
 That he was dead before the morning sun. 755
 And therefore husbands always are undone.
 "He told me then how one Latumius
 Complained one day to his friend Arrius
 That growing in his garden was a tree
 On which, he said, his wives (who numbered three) 760
 Had hung themselves out of their hearts' despite.
 Said Arrius, 'Dear brother, if you might,
 Give me a cutting from that blessed tree,
 And in my garden planted shall it be.'
 "Of later date, of wives to me he read 765
 Who sometimes slew their husbands while in bed,
 Then with their lechers screwed the night away
 While flat upon the floor the bodies lay.
 Some others would drive nails into the brain
 While they were sleeping, that's how they were slain. 770
 Still others gave them poison in their drink.
 Of evil more than any heart can think
 About he read, and he knew more proverbs
 Than in this world there's growth of grass or herbs.
 'It's better that your dwelling place,' said he, 775
 'With a foul dragon or a lion be
 Than with a woman who is wont to chide.
 High on the roof it's better to abide
 Than with an angry wife down in the house.
 Each wicked and contrary to her spouse, 780
 They hate all that their husbands love.' He'd say,
 'A woman casts all of her shame away
 When she casts off her smock.' He'd further tell,
 'A woman fair, if she's not chaste as well,
 Is like a golden ring in a sow's nose.' 785
 Who could have thought, whoever would suppose
 The woe and torment that was in my heart?
 "And when I saw that he would never part
 With reading in this curséd book all night,
 Three leaves all of a sudden I tore right 790

Out of his book while he was reading it,
Then with my fist I gave his cheek a hit
And he fell backwards right into the fire.
He jumped up like a lion full of ire
And with his fist he hit me in the head, 795
And I lay on the floor then as if dead.
And when he saw how stilly there I lay,
He was aghast and would have run away,
But then at last out of my swoon I woke.
'O false thief, have you slain me?' then I spoke. 800
'You've murdered me for all my land, that's why,
Yet let me kiss you now before I die.'
"Then near he came and knelt down by my side,
And said, 'Dear sister Alison, my bride,
So help me God, I'd never hit my dame; 805
For what I've done you are yourself to blame.
Forgive me, I beseech you and implore.'
And then I hit him on the cheek once more.
'This much I am avenged, O thief,' I said.
'I can no longer speak, I'm nearly dead.' 810
"But in the end, for all we suffered through,
We finally reached accord between us two.
The bridle he put wholly in my hand
To have complete control of house and land,
And of his tongue and hands as well--and when 815
He did, I made him burn his book right then.
And when I had by all my mastery
Thus gained for myself all the sovereignty--
When he had said to me, 'My own true wife,
Do as you please the balance of your life; 820
Keep your honor as well as my estate'--
From that day on we never had debate.
I was as true as any wife you'd find
From India to Denmark, and as kind,
So help me God, and he was so to me. 825
I pray that God who sits in majesty
Will bless his soul for all his mercy dear.
Now I will tell my tale if you will hear."