

The Wife of Bath's Tale

In the old days of King Arthur, today
Still praised by Britons in a special way,
This land was filled with fairies all about.
The elf-queen with her jolly little rout 860
In many a green field often danced. Indeed
This was the old belief of which I read;
I speak of many hundred years ago.
But now such elves no one is seeing. No,
For now the prayers and charitable desires 865
Of limiters and other holy friars
Who wander all the land, by every stream,
As thick as specks of dust in a sunbeam,
To bless our halls, chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Boroughs, cities, castles, lofty towers, 870
Villages, granaries, stables, dairies,
Have made sure that no longer are there fairies.
For where there once was wont to walk an elf
There's walking now the limiter himself,
Early and late, to give his auspices, 875
Say matins and his other offices,
Go all about the limit where he's found.
Now women may go safely all around;
In every bush and under every tree
He is the only incubus, and he 880
Won't do a thing except dishonor them.
It happened that King Arthur had with him
A bachelor in his house; this lusty liver,
While riding from his hawking by the river,
Once chanced upon, alone as she was born, 885
A maiden who was walking--soon forlorn,
For he, despite all that she did or said,
By force deprived her of her maidenhead.
Because of this, there was such clamoring
And such demand for justice to the king, 890
This knight was all but numbered with the dead
By course of law, and should have lost his head
(Which may have been the law in that milieu).
But then the queen and other ladies too
Prayed so long that the king might grant him grace, 895
King Arthur spared him for at least a space;
He left him to the queen to do her will,
To choose to save or order them to kill.
The queen then thanked the king with all her might,
And after this the queen spoke with the knight 900
When she saw opportunity one day.
"For you," she said, "things stand in such a way
You can't be sure if you're to live or not.
I'll grant you life if you can tell me what
It is that women most desire. Beware 905
The iron ax, your neckbone now to spare!
And if you cannot tell me right away,
I'll give you leave, a twelvemonth and a day,
That you may go to seek, that you might find
An answer that is of sufficient kind. 910
I want your word before you take a pace:

You'll bring yourself back to this very place."
 This knight with sorrow sighed, was full of woe.
 What could he do? Not as he pleased, and so
 To go away was what he finally chose, 915
 To come back when his year was at its close
 With such an answer as God might provide.
 He took his leave and forth he went to ride.
 He sought in every house and every place
 In hopes he could secure the promised grace 920
 By learning that which women love the most.
 But he did not arrive at any coast
 Where he could find two people on the matter
 Who might agree, if judging by their chatter.
 Some said that women all love riches best, 925
 While some said honor, others jolly zest,
 Some rich array; some said delights in bed,
 And many said to be a widow wed;
 Some others said that our hearts are most eased
 When we are flattered and when we are pleased-- 930
 And he was nigh the truth, if you ask me.
 A man shall win us best with flattery;
 With much attendance, charm, and application
 Can we be caught, whatever be our station.
 Some said our love to which we all aspire 935
 Is to be free to do as we desire,
 With no reproof of vice but with the rule
 That men should say we're wise, not one a fool.
 For truly there is none among us all
 Who, if a man should claw us on the gall, 940
 Won't kick for being told the truth; he who
 Does an assay will find out that it's true.
 But though we may have vices kept within,
 We like to be called wise and clean of sin.
 And some say that we take the most delight 945
 In keeping secrets, keeping our lips tight,
 To just one purpose striving to adhere:
 Not to betray one thing that we may hear.
 That tale's not worth the handle of a rake.
 We women can't keep secrets, heaven's sake! 950
 Just look at Midas--would you hear the tale?
Ovid, among the trifles he'd detail,
 Said Midas had long hair, for it appears
 That on his head had grown two ass's ears.
 This defect he had tried as best he might 955
 To keep well as he could from others' sight,
 And save his wife there was none who could tell.
 He loved her much and trusted her as well
 And prayed that not one living creature she
 Would ever tell of his deformity. 960
 She swore she'd not, though all the world to win,
 Be guilty of such villainy and sin
 And make her husband have so foul a name.
 To tell it would as well bring her to shame.
 But nonetheless she all but nearly died, 965
 So long to have a secret she must hide.
 She thought it swelled so sorely in her heart
 Some word from out of her was bound to start;

And since she dared to tell it to no man,
 Down close beside a marsh the lady ran-- 970
 She had to rush, her heart was so afire.
 Then like a bittern booming in the mire,
 She put her mouth down to the water, saying,
 "Water, make no sound, don't be betraying,
 For I will tell this to no one but you. 975
 My husband has long ass's ears--it's true!"
 She thought, "My heart is cured now, it is out;
 I couldn't keep it longer, there's no doubt."
 So as you see, we may awhile abide
 But it must out, no secret we can hide. 980
 (As for the tale, if you would hear the rest,
 Read Ovid, for that's where you'll learn it best.)
 This knight of whom my tale is all about,
 When seeing that he couldn't find it out--
 That is to say, what women love the most-- 985
 Felt in his breast already like a ghost;
 For home he headed, he could not sojourn,
 The day had come when homeward he must turn.
 And in this woeful state he chanced to ride
 While on his way along a forest side, 990
 And there he saw upon the forest floor
 Some ladies dancing, twenty-four or more.
 Toward these dancers he was quick to turn
 In hope that of some wisdom he might learn;
 But all at once, before he'd gotten there, 995
 The dancers disappeared, he knew not where.
 He didn't see one creature bearing life,
 Save sitting on the green one single wife.
 An uglier creature no mind could devise.
 To meet him this old wife was to arise, 1000
 And said, "You can't get there from here, Sir Knight.
 What are you seeking, by your faith? It might
 Well be to your advantage, sir, to tell;
 Old folks like me know many things, and well."
 "Dear mother," said the knight, "it is for sure 1005
 That I am dead if I cannot secure
 What thing it is that women most desire.
 If you could teach me, gladly I would hire."
 "Give me your word here in my hand," said she,
 "The next thing I request you'll do for me 1010
 If it's a thing that lies within your might,
 And I will tell you then before it's night."
 The knight said, "Here's my oath, I guarantee."
 "Then certainly I dare to boast," said she,
 "Your life is safe, for I'll be standing by; 1015
 Upon my life, the queen will say as I.
 Let's see who is the proudest of them all,
 With kerchief or with headdress standing tall,
 Who shall deny that which I have to teach.
 Now let us go, no need to make a speech." 1020
 She whispered then a message in his ear
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.
 When they had come to court, the knight declared,
 "I've come back to the day, and to be spared,
 For I am now prepared to give reply." 1025

The noble wives and maidens stood nearby,
 And widows too (who were considered wise);
 The queen sat like a justice in her guise.
 All these had been assembled there to hear,
 And then the knight was summoned to appear. 1030

Full silence was commanded in the court
 So that the knight might openly report
 The thing that worldly women love the best.
 He stood not like a beast at one's behest
 But quickly gave his answer loud and clear, 1035
 With manly voice that all the court might hear.

"My liege and lady, generally," said he,
 "What women most desire is sovereignty
 Over their husbands or the ones they love,
 To have the mastery, to be above. 1040
 This is your most desire, though you may kill
 Me if you wish. I'm here, do as you will."
 No wife or maid or widow in the court
 Saw fit to contradict the knight's report;
 They all agreed, "He's worthy of his life." 1045
 And with that word up started the old wife,
 The one the knight had seen upon the green.
 "Mercy," she said, "my sovereign lady queen!
 Before your court departs, grant me my right.
 It's I who taught this answer to the knight, 1050
 For which he gave a solemn oath to me:
 The first thing I request he'd do for me
 If it's a thing that lies within his might.
 Before the court I therefore pray, Sir Knight,"
 She said, "that you will take me as your wife; 1055
 For well you know that I have saved your life.
 If I speak falsely, by your faith accuse me."

The knight replied, "Alas, how woes abuse me!
 I know I made the promise you've expressed.
 For love of God, please choose a new request. 1060
 Take all my goods and let my body go."

"No, damn us both then!" she replied. "For though
 I may be ugly, elderly, and poor,
 I'd give all of the metal and the ore
 That lies beneath the earth and lies above 1065
 If only I could be your wife and love."

"My love?" he said. "No, rather my damnation!
 Alas! that there is any of my nation
 Who ever could so foully be disgraced."
 But all for naught, the end was that he faced 1070
 Constraintment, for he now would have to wed
 And take his gray old wife with him to bed.

Now there are some men who might say perhaps
 That it's my negligence or else a lapse
 That I don't tell you of the joyous way 1075
 In which the feast took place that very day.
 I'll answer briefly should the question fall:
 There wasn't any joy or feast at all,
 Just lots of sorrow, things went grievously.
 He married her that morning privately, 1080
 Then all that day he hid just like an owl,
 So woeful, for his wife looked really foul.

Great was the woe the knight had in his head
 When with his wife he'd been brought to the bed;
 He tossed and then he turned both to and fro. 1085
 His old wife lay there smiling at him, though,
 And said, "Dear husband, benedicite!
 Acts every knight toward his wife this way?
 Is this the law of great King Arthur's house?
 Is every knight of his so distant? Spouse, 1090
 I am your own true love and I'm your wife
 And I'm the one as well who saved your life,
 And I have never done you wrong or spite.
 Why do you treat me so on our first night?
 You act just like a man who's lost his wit. 1095
 What is my guilt? For God's love, tell me it,
 And it shall be amended if I may."
 "Amended?" asked the knight. "Whatever way?
 There's no way it could ever be amended.
 You are so old and loathsome--and descended, 1100
 To add to that, from such a lowly kind--
 No wonder that I toss and turn and wind.
 I wish to God my heart would burst, no less!"
 "Is this," she said, "the cause of your distress?"
 "Why, yes," said he, "and is there any wonder?" 1105
 She said, "I could amend the stress you're under,
 If you desire, within the next three days,
 If you'll treat me more kindly in your ways.
 "But when you talk about gentility
 Like old wealth handed down a family tree, 1110
 That this is what makes of you gentlemen,
 Such arrogance I judge not worth a hen.
 Take him who's always virtuous in his acts
 In public and in private, who exacts
 Of himself all the noble deeds he can, 1115
 And there you'll find the greatest gentleman.
 Christ wills we claim nobility from him,
 Not from our elders or the wealth of them;
 For though they give us all their heritage
 And we claim noble birth by parentage, 1120
 They can't bequeath--all else theirs for the giving--
 To one of us the virtuous way of living
 That made the nobles they were known to be,
 The way they bade us live in like degree.
 "How well the poet wise, the Florentine 1125
 Named Dante, speaks about just what I mean,
 And this is how he rhymes it in his story:
 'Of men who climb their family trees for glory,
 Few will excel, for it is by God's grace
 We gain nobility and not by race.' 1130
 No, from our elders all that we can claim
 Are temporal things such as may hurt and maim.
 "All know as I, that if gentility
 Were something that was planted naturally
 Through all a certain lineage down the line, 1135
 In private and in public they'd be fine
 And noble people doing what is nice,
 Completely free of villainy and vice.
 "Take fire into the darkest house or hut

Between here and Mount Caucasus, then shut 1140
 The doors, and all men leave and not return;
 That fire will still remain as if the burn
 Were being watched by twenty thousand souls.
 Its function will not cease, its nature holds,
 On peril of my life, until it dies. 1145

"Gentility, you then should realize,
 Is not akin to things like property;
 For people act with much variety,
 Not like the fire that always is the same.
 God knows that men may often find, for shame, 1150
 A lord's son who's involved in villainy.
 Who prides himself to have gentility
 Because it happens he's of noble birth,
 With elders virtuous, of noble worth,
 But never tries to do a noble deed 1155
 Nor follow in his dead ancestors' lead,
 Is not a noble, be he duke or earl;
 For bad and sinful deeds just make a churl.
 Sir, your gentility is but the fame
 Of your ancestors, who earned their good name 1160
 With qualities quite foreign to your own.
 Gentility can come from God alone,
 So true gentility's a thing of grace,
 Not something that's bequeathed by rank or place.

"For nobleness, as says Valerius, 1165
 Consider Tullius Hostilius:
 Though poor, he rose to noble heights. Look in
[Boethius](#) or [Seneca](#), and when
 You do, don't doubt the truth of what you read:
 The noble is the man of noble deed. 1170
 And so, dear husband, thus I will conclude:
 If it's true my ancestors were so rude,
 Yet may the Lord, as I do hope, grant me
 The grace to live my life most virtuously;
 For I'm a noble when I so begin 1175
 To live in virtue and avoid sin.

"For poverty you scold me. By your leave,
 The God on high, in whom we both believe,
 Chose willfully to live a poor man's life;
 And surely every man, maiden, or wife 1180
 Can understand that Jesus, heaven's King,
 Would not choose sinful living. It's a thing
 Of honor to be poor without despair,
 As Seneca and other [clerks](#) declare.
 To be poor yet contented, I assert, 1185
 Is to be rich, though having not a shirt.
 The one who covets is the poorer man,
 For he would have that which he never can;
 But he who doesn't have and doesn't crave
 Is rich, though you may hold him but a knave. 1190
 True poverty's been sung of properly;
 As Juvenal said of it, 'Merrily
 The poor man, as he goes upon his way,
 In front of every thief can sing and play.'
 It is a hateful good and, as I guess, 1195
 A great promoter of industriousness.

A source of greater wisdom it can be
 For one who learns to bear it patiently.
 Though it seem wearisome, poverty is
 Possession none will take from you as his. 1200
 Poverty often makes a fellow know
 Himself as well as God when he is low.
 Poverty is an eyeglass, I contend,
 Through which a man can see a truthful friend.
 I bring no harm at all to you, therefore 1205
 Do not reprove me, sire, for being poor.
 "For being old you've also fussed at me;
 Yet surely, sire, though no authority
 Were in a book, you gentlemen select
 Say men should treat an elder with respect 1210
 And call him father, by your courtesy.
 I think I could find authors who agree.
 "If I am old and ugly, as you've said,
 Of cuckoldry you needn't have a dread;
 For filthiness and age, as I may thrive, 1215
 Are guards that keep one's chastity alive.
 But nonetheless, since I know your delight,
 I shall fulfill your worldly appetite.
 "Choose now," she said, "one of these two: that I
 Be old and ugly till the day I die, 1220
 And be to you a true and humble wife,
 One never to displease you all your life;
 Or if you'd rather, have me young and fair,
 And take your chance on those who will repair
 To your house now and then because of me 1225
 (Or to some other place, it may well be).
 Choose for yourself the one you'd rather try."
 The knight gave it some thought, then gave a sigh,
 And finally answered as you are to hear:
 "My lady and my love and wife so dear, 1230
 I leave to your wise governance the measure;
 You choose which one would give the fullest pleasure
 And honor to you, and to me as well.
 I don't care which you do, you best can tell.
 What you desire is good enough for me." 1235
 "You've given me," she said, "the mastery?
 The choice is mine and all's at my behest?"
 "Yes, surely, wife," said he, "I think it best."
 "Then kiss me, we'll no longer fight," she said,
 "For you've my oath that I'll be both instead-- 1240
 That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.
 I pray to God I die in mad despair
 Unless I am to you as good and true
 As any wife since this old world was new.
 Come down, if I'm not as fair to be seen 1245
 As any lady, empress, any queen
 Who ever lived between the east and west,
 Then take my life or do whatever's best.
 Lift up the curtains now, see how it is."
 And when the knight had truly seen all this, 1250
 How she was young and fair in all her charms,
 In utter joy he took her in his arms;
 His heart was bathing in a bath of bliss,

A thousand kisses he began to kiss,
And she obeyed in each and every way, 1255
Whatever was his pleasure or his play.

And so they lived, till their lives' very end,
In perfect joy. And may Christ Jesus send
Us husbands meek and young and fresh abed,
And then the grace to outlive those we wed; 1260
I also pray that Jesus shorten lives
Of those who won't be governed by their wives;
As for old niggards angered by expense,
God send them soon a mighty pestilence!