

# The Wife of Bath's Prologue

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Experience, though no authority  
Were in this world, were good enough for me,  
To speak of woe that is in all marriage;  
For, masters, since I was twelve years of age,  
Thanks be to God Who is for aye alive,  
Of husbands at church door have I had five;  
For men so many times have wedded me;  
And all were worthy men in their degree.  
But someone told me not so long ago  
That since Our Lord, save once, would never go  
To wedding (that at Cana in Galilee),  
Thus, by this same example, showed He me  
I never should have married more than once.  
Lo and behold! What sharp words, for the nonce,  
Beside a well Lord Jesus, God and man,  
Spoke in reproving the Samaritan:  
'For thou hast had five husbands,' thus said He,  
'And he whom thou hast now to be with thee  
Is not thine husband.' Thus He said that day,  
But what He meant thereby I cannot say;  
And I would ask now why that same fifth man  
Was not husband to the Samaritan?  
How many might she have, then, in marriage?  
For I have never heard, in all my age,  
Clear exposition of this number shown,  
Though men may guess and argue up and down.  
But well I know and say, and do not lie,  
God bade us to increase and multiply;  
That worthy text can I well understand.  
And well I know He said, too, my husband  
Should father leave, and mother, and cleave to me;  
But no specific number mentioned He,  
Whether of bigamy or octogamy;  
Why should men speak of it reproachfully?  
Lo, there's the wise old king Dan Solomon;  
I understand he had more wives than one;  
And now would God it were permitted me  
To be refreshed one half as oft as he!  
Which gift of God he had for all his wives!  
No man has such that in this world now lives.  
God knows, this noble king, it strikes my wit,  
The first night he had many a merry fit  
With each of them, so much he was alive!  
Praise be to God that I have wedded five!  
Of whom I did pick out and choose the best  
Both for their nether purse and for their chest  
Different schools make divers perfect clerks,  
Different methods learned in sundry works  
Make the good workman perfect, certainly.  
Of full five husbands tutoring am I.  
Welcome the sixth whenever come he shall.  
Forsooth, I'll not keep chaste for good and all;  
When my good husband from the world is gone,  
Some Christian man shall marry me anon;  
For then, the apostle says that I am free

To wed, in God's name, where it pleases me.  
He says that to be wedded is no sin;  
Better to marry than to burn within.  
What care I though folk speak reproachfully  
Of wicked Lamech and his bigamy?  
I know well Abraham was holy man,  
And Jacob, too, as far as know I can;  
And each of them had spouses more than two;  
And many another holy man also.  
Or can you say that you have ever heard  
That God has ever by His express word  
Marriage forbidden? Pray you, now, tell me.  
Or where commanded He virginity?  
I read as well as you no doubt have read  
The apostle when he speaks of maidenhead;  
He said, commandment of the Lord he'd none.  
Men may advise a woman to be one,  
But such advice is not commandment, no;  
He left the thing to our own judgment so.  
For had Lord God commanded maidenhood,  
He'd have condemned all marriage as not good;  
And certainly, if there were no seed sown,  
Virginity- where then should it be grown?  
Paul dared not to forbid us, at the least,  
A thing whereof his Master'd no behest.  
The dart is set up for virginity;  
Catch it who can; who runs best let us see.  
"But this word is not meant for every wight,  
But where God wills to give it, of His might.  
I know well that the apostle was a maid;  
Nevertheless, and though he wrote and said  
He would that everyone were such as he,  
All is not counsel to virginity;  
And so to be a wife he gave me leave  
Out of permission; there's no shame should grieve  
In marrying me, if that my mate should die,  
Without exception, too, of bigamy.  
And though 'twere good no woman flesh to touch,  
He meant, in his own bed or on his couch;  
For peril 'tis fire and tow to assemble;  
You know what this example may resemble.  
This is the sum: he held virginity  
Nearer perfection than marriage for frailty.  
And frailty's all, I say, save he and she  
Would lead their lives throughout in chastity.  
"I grant this well, I have no great envy  
Though maidenhood's preferred to bigamy;  
Let those who will be clean, body and ghost,  
Of my condition I will make no boast.  
For well you know, a lord in his household,  
He has not every vessel all of gold;  
Some are of wood and serve well all their days.  
God calls folk unto Him in sundry ways,  
And each one has from God a proper gift,  
Some this, some that, as pleases Him to shift.

“Virginity is great perfection known,  
 And continence e’en with devotion shown.  
 But Christ, Who of perfection is the well,  
 Bade not each separate man he should go sell  
 All that he had and give it to the poor  
 And follow Him in such wise going before.  
 He spoke to those that would live perfectly;  
 And, masters, by your leave, such am not I.  
 I will devote the flower of all my age  
 To all the acts and harvests of marriage.  
 “Tell me also, to what purpose or end  
 The genitals were made, that I defend,  
 And for what benefit was man first wrought?  
 Trust you right well, they were not made for naught.  
 Explain who will and argue up and down  
 That they were made for passing out, as known,  
 Of urine, and our two belongings small  
 Were just to tell a female from a male,  
 And for no other cause- ah, say you no?  
 Experience knows well it is not so;  
 And, so the clerics be not with me wroth,  
 I say now that they have been made for both,  
 That is to say, for duty and for ease  
 In getting, when we do not God displease.  
 Why should men otherwise in their books set  
 That man shall pay unto his wife his debt?  
 Now wherewith should he ever make payment,  
 Except he used his blessed instrument?  
 Then on a creature were devised these things  
 For urination and engenderings.  
 “But I say not that every one is bound,  
 Who’s fitted out and furnished as I’ve found,  
 To go and use it to beget an heir;  
 Then men would have for chastity no care.  
 Christ was a maid, and yet shaped like a man,  
 And many a saint, since this old world began,  
 Yet has lived ever in perfect chastity.  
 I bear no malice to virginity;  
 Let such be bread of purest white wheat-seed,  
 And let us wives be called but barley bread;  
 And yet with barley bread (if Mark you scan)  
 Jesus Our Lord refreshed full many a man.  
 In such condition as God places us  
 I’ll persevere, I’m not fastidious.  
 In wifeness I will use my instrument  
 As freely as my Maker has it sent.  
 If I be niggardly, God give me sorrow!  
 My husband he shall have it, eve and morrow,  
 When he’s pleased to come forth and pay his debt.  
 I’ll not delay, a husband I will get  
 Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall  
 And have his tribulations therewithal  
 Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.  
 I have the power during all my life  
 Over his own good body, and not he.  
 For thus the apostle told it unto me;

And bade our husbands that they love us well.  
 And all this pleases me whereof I tell.”  
*[Here follows the Pardoner’s interruption.]*

Up rose the pardoner, and that anon.  
 “Now dame,” said he, “by God and by Saint John,  
 You are a noble preacher in this case!  
 I was about to wed a wife, alas!  
 Why should I buy this on my flesh so dear?  
 No, I would rather wed no wife this year.”  
 “But wait,” said she, “my tale is not begun;  
 Nay, you shall drink from out another tun  
 Before I cease, and savour worse than ale.  
 And when I shall have told you all my tale  
 Of tribulation that is in marriage,  
 Whereof I’ve been an expert all my age,  
 That is to say, myself have been the whip,  
 Then may you choose whether you will go sip  
 Out of that very tun which I shall broach.  
 Beware of it ere you too near approach;  
 For I shall give examples more than ten.  
 Whoso will not be warned by other men  
 By him shall other men corrected be,  
 The self-same words has written Ptolemy;  
 Read in his *Almagest* and find it there.”  
 “Lady, I pray you, if your will it were,”  
 Spoke up this pardoner, “as you began,  
 Tell forth your tale, nor spare for any man,  
 And teach us younger men of your technique.”  
 “Gladly,” said she, “since it may please, not pique.  
 But yet I pray of all this company  
 That if I speak from my own phantasy,  
 They will not take amiss the things I say;  
 For my intention’s only but to play.  
 “Now, sirs, now will I tell you forth my tale.  
 And as I may drink ever wine and ale,  
 I will tell truth of husbands that I’ve had,  
 For three of them were good and two were bad.  
 The three were good men and were rich and old.  
 Not easily could they the promise hold  
 Whereby they had been bound to cherish me.  
 You know well what I mean by that, pardie!  
 So help me God, I laugh now when I think  
 How pitifully by night I made them swink;  
 And by my faith I set by it no store.  
 They’d given me their gold, and treasure more;  
 I needed not do longer diligence  
 To win their love, or show them reverence.  
 They all loved me so well, by God above,  
 I never did set value on their love!  
 A woman wise will strive continually  
 To get herself loved, when she’s not, you see.  
 But since I had them wholly in my hand,  
 And since to me they’d given all their land,  
 Why should I take heed, then, that I should please,  
 Save it were for my profit or my ease?

I set them so to work, that, by my fay,  
 Full many a night they sighed out 'Welaway!'  
 The bacon was not brought them home, I trow,  
 That some men have in Essex at Dunmowe.  
 I governed them so well, by my own law,  
 That each of them was happy as a daw,  
 And fain to bring me fine things from the fair.  
 And they were right glad when I spoke them fair;  
 For God knows that I nagged them mercilessly.  
 "Now hearken how I bore me properly,  
 All you wise wives that well can understand.  
 "Thus shall you speak and wrongfully demand;  
 For half so brazenfacedly can no man  
 Swear to his lying as a woman can.  
 I say not this to wives who may be wise,  
 Except when they themselves do misadvise.  
 A wise wife, if she knows what's for her good,  
 Will swear the crow is mad, and in this mood  
 Call up for witness to it her own maid;  
 But hear me now, for this is what I said.  
 "Sir Dotard, is it thus you stand today?  
 Why is my neighbour's wife so fine and gay?  
 She's honoured over all where'er she goes;  
 I sit at home, I have no decent clo'es.  
 What do you do there at my neighbour's house?  
 Is she so fair? Are you so amorous?  
 Why whisper to our maid? Benedicite!  
 Sir Lecher old, let your seductions be!  
 And if I have a gossip or a friend,  
 Innocently, you blame me like a fiend  
 If I but walk, for company, to his house!  
 You come home here as drunken as a mouse,  
 And preach there on your bench, a curse on you!  
 You tell me it's a great misfortune, too,  
 To wed a girl who costs more than she's worth;  
 And if she's rich and of a higher birth,  
 You say it's torment to abide her folly  
 And put up with her pride and melancholy.  
 And if she be right fair, you utter knave,  
 You say that every lecher will her have;  
 She may no while in chastity abide  
 That is assailed by all and on each side.  
 "You say, some men desire us for our gold,  
 Some for our shape and some for fairness told;  
 And some, that she can either sing or dance,  
 And some, for courtesy and dalliance;  
 Some for her hands and for her arms so small;  
 Thus all goes to the devil in your tale.  
 You say men cannot keep a castle wall  
 That's long assailed on all sides, and by all.  
 "And if that she be foul, you say that she  
 Hankers for every man that she may see;  
 For like a spaniel will she leap on him  
 Until she finds a man to be victim;  
 And not a grey goose swims there in the lake  
 But finds a gander willing her to take.

You say, it is a hard thing to enfold  
 Her whom no man will in his own arms hold.  
 This say you, worthless, when you go to bed;  
 And that no wise man needs thus to be wed,  
 No, nor a man that hearkens unto Heaven.  
 With furious thunder-claps and fiery levin  
 May your thin, withered, wrinkled neck be broke:  
 "You say that dripping eaves, and also smoke,  
 And wives contentious, will make men to flee  
 Out of their houses; ah, benedicite!  
 What ails such an old fellow so to chide?  
 "You say that all we wives our vices hide  
 Till we are married, then we show them well;  
 That is a scoundrel's proverb, let me tell!  
 "You say that oxen, asses, horses, hounds  
 Are tried out variously, and on good grounds;  
 Basins and bowls, before men will them buy,  
 And spoons and stools and all such goods you try.  
 And so with pots and clothes and all array;  
 But of their wives men get no trial, you say,  
 Till they are married, base old dotard you!  
 And then we show what evil we can do.  
 "You say also that it displeases me  
 Unless you praise and flatter my beauty,  
 And save you gaze always upon my face  
 And call me "lovely lady" every place;  
 And save you make a feast upon that day  
 When I was born, and give me garments gay;  
 And save due honour to my nurse is paid  
 As well as to my faithful chambermaid,  
 And to my father's folk and his allies-  
 Thus you go on, old barrel full of lies!  
 "And yet of our apprentice, young Jenkin,  
 For his crisp hair, showing like gold so fine,  
 Because he squires me walking up and down,  
 A false suspicion in your mind is sown;  
 I'd give him naught, though you were dead tomorrow.  
 "But tell me this, why do you hide, with sorrow,  
 The keys to your strong-box away from me?  
 It is my gold as well as yours, pardie.  
 Why would you make an idiot of your dame?  
 Now by Saint James, but you shall miss your aim,  
 You shall not be, although like mad you scold,  
 Master of both my body and my gold;  
 One you'll forgo in spite of both your eyes;  
 Why need you seek me out or set on spies?  
 I think you'd like to lock me in your chest!  
 You should say: "Dear wife, go where you like best,  
 Amuse yourself, I will believe no tales;  
 You're my wife Alis true, and truth prevails."  
 We love no man that guards us or gives charge  
 Of where we go, for we will be at large.  
 "Of all men the most blessed may he be,  
 That wise astrologer, Dan Ptolemy,  
 Who says this proverb in his Almagest:  
 "Of all men he's in wisdom the highest

That nothing cares who has the world in hand.”  
 And by this proverb shall you understand:  
 Since you’ve enough, why do you reck or care  
 How merrily all other folks may fare?  
 For certainly, old dotard, by your leave,  
 You shall have cunt all right enough at eve.  
 He is too much a niggard who’s so tight  
 That from his lantern he’ll give none a light.  
 For he’ll have never the less light, by gad;  
 Since you’ve enough, you need not be so sad.  
 ““You say, also, that if we make us gay  
 With clothing, all in costliest array,  
 That it’s a danger to our chastity;  
 And you must back the saying up, pardie!  
 Repeating these words in the apostle’s name:  
 “In habits meet for chastity, not shame,  
 Your women shall be garmented,” said he,  
 “And not with broidered hair, or jewellery,  
 Or pearls, or gold, or costly gowns and chic;”  
 After your text and after your rubric  
 I will not follow more than would a gnat.  
 You said this, too, that I was like a cat;  
 For if one care to singe a cat’s furred skin,  
 Then would the cat remain the house within;  
 And if the cat’s coat be all sleek and gay,  
 She will not keep in house a half a day,  
 But out she’ll go, ere dawn of any day,  
 To show her skin and caterwaul and play.  
 This is to say, if I’m a little gay,  
 To show my rags I’ll gad about all day.  
 ““Sir Ancient Fool, what ails you with your spies?  
 Though you pray Argus, with his hundred eyes,  
 To be my body-guard and do his best,  
 Faith, he sha’n’t hold me, save I am modest;  
 I could delude him easily- trust me!  
 ““You said, also, that there are three things- three-  
 The which things are a trouble on this earth,  
 And that no man may ever endure the fourth:  
 O dear Sir Rogue, may Christ cut short your life!  
 Yet do you preach and say a hateful wife  
 Is to be reckoned one of these mischances.  
 Are there no other kinds of resemblances  
 That you may liken thus your parables to,  
 But must a hapless wife be made to do?  
 ““You liken woman’s love to very Hell,  
 To desert land where waters do not well.  
 You liken it, also, unto wildfire;  
 The more it burns, the more it has desire  
 To consume everything that burned may be.  
 You say that just as worms destroy a tree,  
 Just so a wife destroys her own husband;  
 Men know this who are bound in marriage band.’  
 “Masters, like this, as you must understand,  
 Did I my old men charge and censure, and  
 Claim that they said these things in drunkenness;  
 And all was false, but yet I took witness

Of Jenkin and of my dear niece also.  
 O Lord, the pain I gave them and the woe,  
 All guiltless, too, by God’s grief exquisite!  
 For like a stallion could I neigh and bite.  
 I could complain, though mine was all the guilt,  
 Or else, full many a time, I’d lost the tilt.  
 Whoso comes first to mill first gets meal ground;  
 I whimpered first and so did them confound.  
 They were right glad to hasten to excuse  
 Things they had never done, save in my ruse.  
 “With wenches would I charge him, by this hand,  
 When, for some illness, he could hardly stand.  
 Yet tickled this the heart of him, for he  
 Deemed it was love produced such jealousy.  
 I swore that all my walking out at night  
 Was but to spy on girls he kept outright;  
 And under cover of that I had much mirth.  
 For all such wit is given us at birth;  
 Deceit, weeping, and spinning, does God give  
 To women, naturally, the while they live.  
 And thus of one thing I speak boastfully,  
 I got the best of each one, finally,  
 By trick, or force, or by some kind of thing,  
 As by continual growls or murmuring;  
 Especially in bed had they mischance,  
 There would I chide and give them no pleasance;  
 I would no longer in the bed abide  
 If I but felt his arm across my side,  
 Till he had paid his ransom unto me;  
 Then would I let him do his nicety.  
 And therefore to all men this tale I tell,  
 Let gain who may, for everything’s to sell.  
 With empty hand men may no falcons lure;  
 For profit would I all his lust endure,  
 And make for him a well-feigned appetite;  
 Yet I in bacon never had delight;  
 And that is why I used so much to chide.  
 For if the pope were seated there beside  
 I’d not have spared them, no, at their own board.  
 For by my truth, I paid them, word for word.  
 So help me the True God Omnipotent,  
 Though I right now should make my testament,  
 I owe them not a word that was not quit.  
 I brought it so about, and by my wit,  
 That they must give it up, as for the best,  
 Or otherwise we’d never have had rest.  
 For though he glared and scowled like lion mad,  
 Yet failed he of the end he wished he had.  
 “Then would I say: ‘Good dearie, see you keep  
 In mind how meek is Wilkin, our old sheep;  
 Come near, my spouse, come let me kiss your cheek!  
 You should be always patient, aye, and meek,  
 And have a sweetly scrupulous tenderness,  
 Since you so preach of old Job’s patience, yes.  
 Suffer always, since you so well can preach;  
 And, save you do, be sure that we will teach

That it is well to leave a wife in peace.  
 One of us two must bow, to be at ease;  
 And since a man's more reasonable, they say,  
 Than woman is, you must have patience aye.  
 What ails you that you grumble thus and groan?  
 Is it because you'd have my cunt alone?  
 Why take it all, lo, have it every bit;  
 Peter! Beshrew you but you're fond of it!  
 For if I would go peddle my belle chose,  
 I could walk out as fresh as is a rose;  
 But I will keep it for your own sweet tooth.  
 You are to blame, by God I tell the truth.'  
 "Such were the words I had at my command.  
 Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.  
 "My fourth husband, he was a reveller,  
 That is to say, he kept a paramour;  
 And young and full of passion then was I,  
 Stubborn and strong and jolly as a pie.  
 Well could I dance to tune of harp, nor fail  
 To sing as well as any nightingale  
 When I had drunk a good draught of sweet wine.  
 Metellius, the foul churl and the swine,  
 Did with a staff deprive his wife of life  
 Because she drank wine; had I been his wife  
 He never should have frightened me from drink;  
 For after wine, of Venus must I think:  
 For just as surely as cold produces hail,  
 A liquorish mouth must have a lickerish tail.  
 In women wine's no bar of impotence,  
 This know all lechers by experience.  
 "But Lord Christ! When I do remember me  
 Upon my youth and on my jollity,  
 It tickles me about my heart's deep root.  
 To this day does my heart sing in salute  
 That I have had my world in my own time.  
 But age, alas! that poisons every prime,  
 Has taken away my beauty and my pith;  
 Let go, farewell, the devil go therewith!  
 The flour is gone, there is no more to tell,  
 The bran, as best I may, must I now sell;  
 But yet to be right merry I'll try, and  
 Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.  
 "I say that in my heart I'd great despite  
 When he of any other had delight.  
 But he was quit by God and by Saint Joce!  
 I made, of the same wood, a staff most gross;  
 Not with my body and in manner foul,  
 But certainly I showed so gay a soul  
 That in his own thick grease I made him fry  
 For anger and for utter jealousy.  
 By God, on earth I was his purgatory,  
 For which I hope his soul lives now in glory.  
 For God knows, many a time he sat and sung  
 When the shoe bitterly his foot had wrung.  
 There was no one, save God and he, that knew  
 How, in so many ways, I'd twist the screw.

He died when I came from Jerusalem,  
 And lies entombed beneath the great rood-beam,  
 Although his tomb is not so glorious  
 As was the sepulchre of Darius,  
 The which Apelles wrought full cleverly;  
 'Twas waste to bury him expensively.  
 Let him fare well. God give his soul good rest,  
 He now is in the grave and in his chest.  
 "And now of my fifth husband will I tell.  
 God grant his soul may never get to Hell!  
 And yet he was to me most brutal, too;  
 My ribs yet feel as they were black and blue,  
 And ever shall, until my dying day.  
 But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,  
 And therewithal he could so well impose,  
 What time he wanted use of my belle chose,  
 That though he'd beaten me on every bone,  
 He could re-win my love, and that full soon.  
 I guess I loved him best of all, for he  
 Gave of his love most sparingly to me.  
 We women have, if I am not to lie,  
 In this love matter, a quaint fantasy;  
 Look out a thing we may not lightly have,  
 And after that we'll cry all day and crave.  
 Forbid a thing, and that thing covet we;  
 Press hard upon us, then we turn and flee.  
 Sparingly offer we our goods, when fair;  
 Great crowds at market for dearer ware,  
 And what's too common brings but little price;  
 All this knows every woman who is wise.  
 "My fifth husband, may God his spirit bless!  
 Whom I took all for love, and not riches,  
 Had been sometime a student at Oxford,  
 And had left school and had come home to board  
 With my best gossip, dwelling in our town,  
 God save her soul! Her name was Alison.  
 She knew my heart and all my privy  
 Better than did our parish priest, s'help me!  
 To her confided I my secrets all.  
 For had my husband pissed against a wall,  
 Or done a thing that might have cost his life,  
 To her and to another worthy wife,  
 And to my niece whom I loved always well,  
 I would have told it- every bit I'd tell,  
 And did so, many and many a time, God wot,  
 Which made his face full often red and hot  
 For utter shame; he blamed himself that he  
 Had told me of so deep a privy.  
 "So it befell that on a time, in Lent  
 (For oftentimes I to my gossip went,  
 Since I loved always to be glad and gay  
 And to walk out, in March, April, and May,  
 From house to house, to hear the latest malice),  
 Jenkin the clerk, and my gossip Dame Alis,  
 And I myself into the meadows went.  
 My husband was in London all that Lent;

I had the greater leisure, then, to play,  
 And to observe, and to be seen, I say,  
 By pleasant folk; what knew I where my face  
 Was destined to be loved, or in what place?  
 Therefore I made my visits round about  
 To vigils and processions of devout,  
 To preaching too, and shrines of pilgrimage,  
 To miracle plays, and always to each marriage,  
 And wore my scarlet skirt before all wights.  
 These worms and all these moths and all these mites,  
 I say it at my peril, never ate;  
 And know you why? I wore it early and late.  
 "Now will I tell you what befell to me.  
 I say that in the meadows walked we three  
 Till, truly, we had come to such dalliance,  
 This clerk and I, that, of my vigilance,  
 I spoke to him and told him how that he,  
 Were I a widow, might well marry me.  
 For certainly I say it not to brag,  
 But I was never quite without a bag  
 Full of the needs of marriage that I seek.  
 I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek  
 That has but one hole into which to run,  
 And if it fail of that, then all is done.  
 "I made him think he had enchanted me;  
 My mother taught me all that subtlety.  
 And then I said I'd dreamed of him all night,  
 He would have slain me as I lay upright,  
 And all my bed was full of very blood;  
 But yet I hoped that he would do me good,  
 For blood betokens gold, as I was taught.  
 And all was false, I dreamed of him just-naught,  
 Save as I acted on my mother's lore,  
 As well in this thing as in many more.  
 "But now, let's see, what was I going to say?  
 Aha, by God, I know! It goes this way.  
 "When my fourth husband lay upon his bier,  
 I wept enough and made but sorry cheer,  
 As wives must always, for it's custom's grace,  
 And with my kerchief covered up my face;  
 But since I was provided with a mate,  
 I really wept but little, I may state.  
 "To church my man was borne upon the morrow  
 By neighbours, who for him made signs of sorrow;  
 And Jenkin, our good clerk, was one of them.  
 So help me God, when rang the requiem  
 After the bier, I thought he had a pair  
 Of legs and feet so clean-cut and so fair  
 That all my heart I gave to him to hold.  
 He was, I think, but twenty winters old,  
 And I was forty, if I tell the truth;  
 But then I always had a young colt's tooth.  
 Gap-toothed I was, and that became me well;  
 I had the print of holy Venus' seal.  
 So help me God, I was a healthy one,  
 And fair and rich and young and full of fun;

And truly, as my husbands all told me,  
 I had the silkiest quoniam that could be.  
 For truly, I am all Venusian  
 In feeling, and my brain is Martian.  
 Venus gave me my lust, my lickerishness,  
 And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.  
 Taurus was my ascendant, with Mars therein.  
 Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!  
 I followed always my own inclination  
 By virtue of my natal constellation;  
 Which wrought me so I never could withdraw  
 My Venus-chamber from a good fellow.  
 Yet have I Mars's mark upon my face,  
 And also in another private place.  
 For God so truly my salvation be  
 As I have never loved for policy,  
 But ever followed my own appetite,  
 Though he were short or tall, or black or white;  
 I took no heed, so that he cared for me,  
 How poor he was, nor even of what degree.  
 "What should I say now, save, at the month's end,  
 This jolly, gentle, Jenkin clerk, my friend,  
 Had wedded me full ceremoniously,  
 And to him gave I all the land in fee  
 That ever had been given me before;  
 But, later I repented me full sore.  
 He never suffered me to have my way.  
 By God, he smote me on the ear, one day,  
 Because I tore out of his book a leaf,  
 So that from this my ear is grown quite deaf.  
 Stubborn I was as is a lioness,  
 And with my tongue a very jay, I guess,  
 And walk I would, as I had done before,  
 From house to house, though I should not, he swore.  
 For which he oftentimes would sit and preach  
 And read old Roman tales to me and teach  
 How one Sulpicius Gallus left his wife  
 And her forsook for term of all his life  
 Because he saw her with bared head, I say,  
 Looking out from his door, upon a day.  
 "Another Roman told he of by name  
 Who, since his wife was at a summer-game  
 Without his knowing, he forsook her eke.  
 And then would he within his Bible seek  
 That proverb of the old Ecclesiast  
 Where he commands so freely and so fast  
 That man forbid his wife to gad about;  
 Then would he thus repeat, with never doubt:  
 'Whoso would build his whole house out of sallows,  
 And spur his blind horse to run over fallows,  
 And let his wife alone go seeking hallows,  
 Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.'  
 But all for naught, I didn't care a haw  
 For all his proverbs, nor for his old saw,  
 Nor yet would I by him corrected be.  
 I hate one that my vices tells to me,

And so do more of us- God knows!- than I.  
 This made him mad with me, and furiously,  
 That I'd not yield to him in any case.  
 "Now will I tell you truth, by Saint Thomas,  
 Of why I tore from out his book a leaf,  
 For which he struck me so it made me deaf.  
 "He had a book that gladly, night and day,  
 For his amusement he would read away.  
 He called it 'Theophrastus' and 'Valerius',  
 At which book would he laugh, uproarious.  
 And, too, there sometime was a clerk at Rome,  
 A cardinal, that men called Saint Jerome,  
 Who made a book against Jovinian;  
 In which book, too, there was Tertullian,  
 Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise  
 Who was abbess near Paris' diocese;  
 And too, the Proverbs of King Solomon,  
 And Ovid's Art, and books full many a one.  
 And all of these were bound in one volume.  
 And every night and day 'twas his custom,  
 When he had leisure and took some vacation  
 From all his other worldly occupation,  
 To read, within this book, of wicked wives.  
 He knew of them more legends and more lives  
 Than are of good wives written in the Bible.  
 For trust me, it's impossible, no libel,  
 That any cleric shall speak well of wives,  
 Unless it be of saints and holy lives,  
 But naught for other women will they do.  
 Who painted first the lion, tell me who?  
 By God, if women had but written stories,  
 As have these clerks within their oratories,  
 They would have written of men more wickedness  
 Than all the race of Adam could redress.  
 The children of Mercury and of Venus  
 Are in their lives antagonistic thus;  
 For Mercury loves wisdom and science,  
 And Venus loves but pleasure and expense.  
 Because they different dispositions own,  
 Each falls when other's in ascendant shown.  
 And God knows Mercury is desolate  
 In Pisces, wherein Venus rules in state;  
 And Venus falls when Mercury is raised;  
 Therefore no woman by a clerk is praised.  
 A clerk, when he is old and can naught do  
 Of Venus' labours worth his worn-out shoe,  
 Then sits he down and writes, in his dotage,  
 That women cannot keep vow of marriage!  
 "But now to tell you, as I started to,  
 Why I was beaten for a book, pardieu.  
 Upon a night Jenkin, who was our sire,  
 Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,  
 Of Mother Eve who, by her wickedness,  
 First brought mankind to all his wretchedness,  
 For which Lord Jesus Christ Himself was slain,  
 Who, with His heart's blood, saved us thus again.

Lo here, expressly of woman, may you find  
 That woman was the ruin of mankind.  
 "Then read he out how Samson lost his hairs,  
 Sleeping, his leman cut them with her shears;  
 And through this treason lost he either eye.  
 "Then read he out, if I am not to lie,  
 Of Hercules, and Deianira's desire  
 That caused him to go set himself on fire.  
 "Nothing escaped him of the pain and woe  
 That Socrates had with his spouses two;  
 How Xantippe threw piss upon his head;  
 This hapless man sat still, as he were dead;  
 He wiped his head, no more durst he complain  
 Than 'Ere the thunder ceases comes the rain.'  
 "Then of Pasiphae, the queen of Crete,  
 For cursedness he thought the story sweet;  
 Fie! Say no more- it is an awful thing-  
 Of her so horrible lust and love-liking.  
 "Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery,  
 Who caused her husband's death by treachery,  
 He read all this with greatest zest, I vow.  
 "He told me, too, just when it was and how  
 Amphiarus at Thebes lost his life;  
 My husband had a legend of his wife  
 Eriphyle who, for a brooch of gold,  
 In secrecy to hostile Greeks had told  
 Whereat her husband had his hiding place,  
 For which he found at Thebes but sorry grace.  
 "Of Livia and Lucia told he me,  
 For both of them their husbands killed, you see,  
 The one for love, the other killed for hate;  
 Livia her husband, on an evening late,  
 Made drink some poison, for she was his foe.  
 Lucia, lecherous, loved her husband so  
 That, to the end he'd always of her think,  
 She gave him such a philtre, for love-drink,  
 That he was dead or ever it was morrow;  
 And husbands thus, by same means, came to sorrow.  
 "Then did he tell how one Latunius  
 Complained unto his comrade Arrius  
 That in his garden grew a baleful tree  
 Whereon, he said, his wives, and they were three,  
 Had hanged themselves for wretchedness and woe.  
 'O brother,' Arrius said, 'and did they so?  
 Give me a graft of that same blessed tree  
 And in my garden planted it shall be!'  
 "Of wives of later date he also read,  
 How some had slain their husbands in their bed  
 And let their lovers shag them all the night  
 While corpses lay upon the floor upright.  
 And some had driven nails into the brain  
 While husbands slept and in such wise were slain.  
 And some had given them poison in their drink.  
 He told more evil than the mind can think.  
 And therewithal he knew of more proverbs  
 Than in this world there grows of grass or herbs.

'Better,' he said, 'your habitation be  
 With lion wild or dragon foul,' said he,  
 'Than with a woman who will nag and chide.'  
 'Better,' he said, 'on the housetop abide  
 Than with a brawling wife down in the house;  
 Such are so wicked and contrarious  
 They hate the thing their husband loves, for aye.'  
 He said, 'a woman throws her shame away  
 When she throws off her smock,' and further, too:  
 'A woman fair, save she be chaste also,  
 Is like a ring of gold in a sow's nose.'  
 Who would imagine or who would suppose  
 What grief and pain were in this heart of mine?  
 "And when I saw he'd never cease, in fine,  
 His reading in this cursed book at night,  
 Three leaves of it I snatched and tore outright  
 Out of his book, as he read on; and eke  
 I with my fist so took him on the cheek  
 That in our fire he reeled and fell right down.  
 Then he got up as does a wild lion,  
 And with his fist he struck me on the head,  
 And on the floor I lay as I were dead.  
 And when he saw how limp and still I lay,  
 He was afraid and would have run away,  
 Until at last, out of my swoon I made:  
 'Oh, have you slain me, you false thief?' I said,  
 'And for my land have you thus murdered me?  
 Kiss me before I die, and let me be.'  
 "He came to me and near me he knelt down,  
 And said: 'O my dear sister Alison,  
 So help me God, I'll never strike you more;  
 What I have done, you are to blame therefor.  
 But all the same forgiveness now I seek!  
 And thereupon I hit him on the cheek,  
 And said: 'Thief, so much vengeance do I wreak!  
 Now will I die; I can no longer speak!  
 But at the last, and with much care and woe,  
 We made it up between ourselves. And so  
 He put the bridle reins within my hand  
 To have the governing of house and land;  
 And of his tongue and of his hand, also;  
 And made him burn his book, right then, oho!  
 And when I had thus gathered unto me  
 Masterfully, the entire sovereignty,  
 And he had said: 'My own true wedded wife,  
 Do as you please the term of all your life,  
 Guard your own honour and keep fair my state'-  
 After that day we never had debate.  
 God help me now, I was to him as kind  
 As any wife from Denmark unto Ind,  
 And also true, and so was he to me.  
 I pray to God, Who sits in majesty,  
 To bless his soul, out of His mercy dear!  
 Now will I tell my tale, if you will hear."

*[Here follow words between the Summoner*

*and the Friar.]*

The friar laughed when he had heard all this.  
 "Now dame," said he, "so have I joy or bliss  
 This is a long preamble to a tale!"  
 And when the summoner heard this friar's hail,  
 "Lo," said the summoner, "by God's arms two!  
 A friar will always interfere, mark you.  
 Behold, good men, a housefly and a friar  
 Will fall in every dish and matters higher.  
 Why speak of preambling; you in your gown?  
 What! Amble, trot, hold peace, or go sit down;  
 You hinder our diversion thus to inquire."  
 "Aye, say you so, sir summoner?" said the friar,  
 "Now by my faith I will, before I go,  
 Tell of a summoner such a tale, or so,  
 That all the folk shall laugh who're in this place'  
 "Otherwise, friar, I beshrew your face,"  
 Replied this summoner, "and beshrew me  
 If I do not tell tales here, two or three,  
 Of friars ere I come to Sittingbourne,  
 That certainly will give you cause to mourn,  
 For well I know your patience will be gone."  
 Our host cried out, "Now peace, and that anon!"  
 And said he: "Let the woman tell her tale.  
 You act like people who are drunk with ale.  
 Do, lady, tell your tale, and that is best."  
 "All ready, sir," said she, "as you request,  
 If I have license of this worthy friar."  
 "Yes, dame," said he, "to hear you's my desire."

*[Here the Wife of Bath ends her prologue and begins her tale.]*