

The Pardoner said nothing, not a word;  
He was so angry that he couldn't speak.  
'Well,' said our Host, 'if you're for showing pique,  
I'll joke no more, not with an angry man.'

The worthy Knight immediately began,  
Seeing the fun was getting rather rough,  
And said, 'No more, we've all had quite enough.  
Now, Master Pardoner, perk up, look cheery!  
And you, Sir Host, whom I esteem so dearly,  
I beg of you to kiss the Pardoner.'

'Come, Pardoner, draw nearer, my dear sir.  
Let's laugh again and keep the ball in play.'  
They kissed, and we continued on our way.

## [GROUP D]

## THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

## The Wife of Bath's Prologue

'If there were no authority on earth  
Except experience, mine, for what it's worth,  
And that's enough for me, all goes to show  
That marriage is a misery and a woe;  
For let me say, if I may make so bold,  
My lords, since when I was but twelve years old,  
Thanks be to God Eternal evermore,  
Five husbands have I had at the church door;  
Yes, it's a fact that I have had so many,  
All worthy in their way, as good as any.  
'Someone said recently for my persuasion  
That as Christ only went on one occasion  
To grace a wedding – in Cana of Galilee –  
He taught me by example there to see

That it is wrong to marry more than once.  
Consider, too, how sharply, for the nonce,  
He spoke, rebuking the Samaritan  
Beside the well, Christ Jesus, God and man.  
"Thou has had five men husband unto thee  
And he that even now thou hast," said He,  
"Is not thy husband." Such the words that fell;  
But what He meant thereby I cannot tell.  
Why was her fifth – explain it if you can  
No lawful spouse to the Samaritan?  
How many might have had her, then, to wife?  
I've never heard an answer all my life  
To give the number final definition.  
People may guess or frame a supposition,  
But I can say for certain, it's no lie,  
God bade us all to wax and multiply.  
That kindly text I well can understand.  
Is not my husband under God's command  
To leave his father and mother and take me?  
No word of what the number was to be,  
Then why not marry two or even eight?  
And why speak evil of the married state?

'Take wise King Solomon of long ago;  
We hear he had a thousand wives or so.  
And would to God it were allowed to me  
To be refreshed, aye, half so much as he!  
He must have had a gift of God for wives,  
No one to match him in a world of lives!  
This noble king, one may as well admit,  
On the first night threw many a merry fit  
With each of them, he was so much alive.  
Blessed be God that I have wedded five!  
Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears.  
I can't keep continent for years and years.  
No sooner than one husband's dead and gone  
Some other Christian man shall take me on,  
For then, so says the Apostle, I am free  
To wed, o' God's name, where it pleases me.

Wedding's no sin, so far as I can learn.  
Better it is to marry than to burn.

'What do I care if people choose to see  
Scandal in Lamech for his bigamy?

I know that Abraham was a holy man  
And Jacob too – I speak as best I can –  
Yet each of them, we know, had several brides,  
Like many another holy man besides.

Show me a time or text where God disparages  
Or sets a prohibition upon marriages  
Expressly, let me have it! Show it me!

And where did He command virginity?  
I know as well as you do, never doubt it,  
All the Apostle Paul has said about it;

He said that as for precepts he had none.

One may advise a woman to be one;

Advice is no commandment in my view.

He left it in our judgement what to do.

'Had God commanded maidenhood to all

Marriage would be condemned beyond recall,

And certainly if seed were never sown,

How ever could virginity be grown?

Paul did not dare pronounce, let matters rest,

His Master having given him no behest.

There's a prize offered for virginity;

Catch as catch can! Who's in for it? Let's see!

'It is not everyone who hears the call;

On whom God wills He lets His power fall.

The Apostle was a virgin, well I know;

Nevertheless, though all his writings show

He wished that everyone were such as he,

It's all mere counsel to virginity.

And as for being married, he lets me do it

Out of indulgence, so there's nothing to it

In marrying me, suppose my husband dead,

There's nothing bigamous in such a bed.

Though it were good a man should never touch

A woman (meaning here in bed and such)

And dangerous to assemble fire and tow  
– What this allusion means you all must know –  
He only says virginity is fresh.

More perfect than the frailty of the flesh  
In married life – except when he and she  
Prefer to live in married chastity.

'I grant it you. I'll never say a word

Decrying maidenhood although preferred

To frequent marriage; there are those who mean

To live in their virginity, as clean

In body as in soul, and never mate.

I'll make no boast about my own estate.

As in a noble household, we are told,

Not every dish and vessel's made of gold,

Some are of wood, yet earn their master's praise,

God calls His folk to Him in many ways.

To each of them God gave His proper gift,

Some this, some that, and left them to make shift.

Virginity is indeed a great perfection,

And married continence, for God's dilection,

But Christ, who of perfection is the well,

Bade not that everyone should go and sell

All that he had and give it to the poor

To follow in His footsteps, that is sure.

He spoke to those that would live perfectly,

And by your leave, my lords, that's not for me.

I will bestow the flower of life, the honey,

Upon the acts and fruit of matrimony.

'Tell me to what conclusion or in aid

Of what were generative organs made?

And for what profit were those creatures wrought?

I trust me, they cannot have been made for naught.

Gloze as you will and plead the explanation

That they were only made for the purgation

Of urine, little things of no avail

Except to know a female from a male,

And nothing else. Did somebody say no?

Experience knows well it isn't so.

The learned may rebuke me, or be loth  
To think it so, but they were made for both,  
That is to say both use and pleasure in  
Engendering, except in case of sin.

Why else the proverb written down and set  
In books: "A man must yield his wife her debt"?

What means of paying her can he invent  
Unless he use his silly instrument?

It follows they were fashioned at creation  
Both to purge urine and for propagation.

'But I'm not saying everyone is bound

Who has such harness as you heard me expound

To go and use it breeding; that would be  
To show too little care for chastity.

Christ was a virgin, fashioned as a man,

And many of his saints since time began  
Were ever perfect in their chastity.

I'll have no quarrel with virginity.

Let them be pure wheat loaves of maidenhead

And let us wives be known for barley-bread;

Yet Mark can tell that barley-bread sufficed

To freshen many at the hand of Christ.

In that estate to which God summoned me

I'll persevere; I'm not pertickery.

In wifehood I will use my instrument

As freely as my Maker me it sent.

If I turn difficult, God give me sorrow!

My husband, he shall have it eve and morrow

Whenever he likes to come and pay his debt,

I won't prevent him! I'll have a husband yet

Who shall be both my debtor and my slave

And bear his tribulation to the grave

Upon his flesh, as long as I'm his wife.

For mine shall be the power all his life

Over his proper body, and not he,

Thus the Apostle Paul has told it me,

And bade our husbands they should love us well;

There's a command on which I like to dwell . . .

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon  
'Madam,' he said, 'by God and by St John,  
That's noble preaching no one could surpass!

I was about to take a wife; alas!

Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?

There'll be no marrying for me this year!

'You wait,' she said, 'my story's not begun.

You'll taste another brew before I've done;

You'll find it doesn't taste as good as ale;

And when I've finished telling you my tale

Of tribulation in the married life

In which I've been an expert as a wife,

That is to say, myself have been the whip.

So please yourself whether you want to sip

At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.

Be cautious before making the approach,

For I'll give instances, and more than ten.

And those who won't be warned by other men,

By other men shall suffer their correction,

So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.\*

You read his *Almagest*; you'll find it there.'

'Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,'

The Pardoner said, 'go on as you began!

Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.

Instruct us younger men in your technique.'

'Gladly,' she said, 'if you will let me speak,

But still I hope the company won't reprove me

Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,

And please don't be offended at my views;

They're really only offered to amuse.

'Now, gentlemen, I'll on and tell my tale

And as I hope to drink good wine and ale

I'll tell the truth. Those husbands that I had,

Three of them were good and two were bad.

The three that I call "good" were rich and old.

They could indeed with difficulty hold

The articles that bound them all to me;

(No doubt you understand my simile).

So help me God, I have to laugh outright  
 Remembering how I made them work at night!  
 And faith I set no store by it; no pleasure  
 It was to me. They'd given me their treasure,  
 And so I had no need of diligence  
 Winning their love, or showing reverence.  
 They loved me well enough, so, heavens above,  
 Why should I make a dainty of their love?  
 'A knowing woman's work is never done  
 To get a lover if she hasn't one,  
 But as I had them eating from my hand  
 And as they'd yielded me their gold and land,  
 Why then take trouble to provide them pleasure  
 Unless to profit and amuse my leisure?  
 I set them so to work, I'm bound to say;  
 Many a night they sang, "Alack the day!"  
 Never for them the flitch of bacon though  
 That some have won in Essex at Dunmow!\*

I managed them so well by my technique  
 Each was delighted to go out and seek  
 And buy some pretty thing for me to wear,  
 Happy if I as much as spoke them fair.  
 God knows how spitefully I used to scold them.  
 Listen, I'll tell you how I used to hold them,  
 You knowing women, who can understand,  
 First put them in the wrong, and out of hand.  
 No one can be so bold – I mean no man –  
 At lies and swearing as a woman can.  
 This is no news, as you'll have realized,  
 To knowing ones, but to the misadvised.  
 A knowing wife if she is worth her salt  
 Can always prove her husband is at fault,  
 And even though the fellow may have heard  
 Some story told him by a little bird  
 She knows enough to prove the bird is crazy  
 And get her maid to witness she's a daisy,  
 With full agreement, scarce solicited.  
 But listen. Here's the sort of thing I said:

"Now, sir old dotard, what is that you say?  
 Why is my neighbour's wife so smart and gay?  
 She is respected everywhere she goes.  
 I sit at home and have no decent clothes.  
 Why haunt her house? What are you doing there?  
 Are you so amorous? Is she so fair?  
 What, whispering secrets to our maid? For shame,  
 Sir ancient lecher! Time you dropped that game.  
 And if I see my gossip or a friend  
 You scold me like a devil! There's no end  
 If I as much as stroll towards his house.  
 Then you come home as drunken as a mouse,  
 You mount your throne and preach, chapter and verse  
 – All nonsense – and you tell me it's a curse  
 To marry a poor woman – she's expensive;  
 Or if her family's wealthy and extensive  
 You say it's torture to endure her pride  
 And melancholy airs, and more beside.  
 And if she has a pretty face, old traitor,  
 You say she's game for any fornicator  
 And ask what likelihood will keep her straight  
 With all those men who lie about in wait.

"You say that some desire us for our wealth,  
 Some for our shapeliness, our looks, our health,  
 Some for our singing, others for our dancing,  
 Some for our gentleness and dalliant glancing,  
 And some because our hands are soft and small;  
 By your account the devil gets us all.

"You say what castle wall can be so strong  
 As to hold out against a siege for long?  
 And if her looks are foul you say that she  
 Is hot for every man that she can see,  
 Leaping upon them with a spaniel's airs  
 Until she finds a man to buy her wares.  
 Never was goose upon the lake so grey  
 But that she found a gander, so you say.  
 You say it's hard to keep a girl controlled  
 If she's the kind that no one wants to hold.



That's what you say as you stump off to bed,  
You brute! You say no man of sense would wed,  
That is, not if he wants to go to Heaven.

Wild thunderbolts and fire from the Seven  
Planets descend and break your withered neck!  
"You say that buildings falling into wreck,

And smoke, and scolding women, are the three  
Things that will drive a man from home. Dear me!  
What ails the poor old man to grumble so?

"We women hide our faults but let them show  
Once we are safely married, so you say.  
There's a fine proverb for a popinjay!

"You say that oxen, asses, hounds and horses  
Can be tried out on various ploys and courses;  
And basins too, and dishes when you buy them,  
Spoons, chairs and furnishings, a man can try them  
As he can try a suit of clothes, no doubt,

But no one ever tries a woman out  
Until he's married her; old dotard crow!  
And then you say she lets her vices show.

"You also say we count it for a crime  
Unless you praise our beauty all the time,  
Unless you're always poring on our faces  
And call us pretty names in public places;  
Or if you fail to treat me to a feast

Upon my birthday – presents at the least –  
Or to respect my nurse and her grey hairs,  
Or be polite to all my maids upstairs  
And to my father's cronies and his spies.

That's what you say, old barrelful of lies!  
"Then there's our young apprentice, handsome Johnny,

Because he has crisp hair that shines as bonny  
As finest gold, and squires me up and down  
You show your low suspicions in a frown.

I wouldn't have him, not if you died to-morrow!  
"And tell me this, God punish you with sorrow,  
Why do you hide the keys of coffer doors?  
It's just as much my property as yours.

Do you want to make an idiot of your wife?  
Now, by the Lord that gave me soul and life,  
You shan't have both, you can't be such a noddý  
As think to keep my goods and have my body!  
One you must do without, whatever you say.

And do you need to spy on me all day?

I think you'd like to lock me in your coffer!

'Go where you please, dear wife,' you ought to offer,  
'Amuse yourself! I shan't give ear to malice,  
I know you for a virtuous wife, Dame Alice.'  
We cannot love a husband who takes charge  
Of where we go. We like to be at large.

"Above all other men may God confer  
His blessing on that wise astrologer  
Sir Ptolemy who, in his *Almagest*,

Has set this proverb down: 'Of men, the best  
And wisest care not who may have in hand  
The conduct of the world.' I understand

That means, 'If you've enough, you shouldn't care  
How prosperously other people fare.'

Be sure, old dotard, if you call the bluff,  
You'll get your evening rations right enough.  
He's a mean fellow that lets no man handle  
His lantern when it's just to light a candle  
He has lost no light, he hasn't felt the strain;

And you have light enough, so why complain?

"And when a woman tries a mild display  
In dress or costly ornament, you say  
It is a danger to her chastity,

And then, bad luck to you, start making free  
With Bible tags in the Apostle's name:

'And in like manner, chastely and with shame,  
You women should adorn yourselves,' said he,  
'And not with braided hair or jewelry,

With pearl or golden ornament.' What next!  
I'll pay as much attention to your text  
And rubric in such things as would a gnat.

"And once you said that I was like a cat,

For if you singe a cat it will not roam

And that's the way to keep a cat at home.

But when she feels her fur is sleek and gay

She can't be kept indoors for half a day

But off she takes herself as dusk is falling

To show her fur and go a-caterwauling.

Which means if I feel gay, as you suppose,

I shall run out to show my poor old clothes.

"Silly old fool! You and your private spies!

Go on, beg Argus with his hundred eyes

To be my bodyguard, that's better still!

But yet he shan't, I say, against my will.

I'll pull him by the beard, believe you me!

"And once you said that principally three\*

Misfortunes trouble earth, east, west and north,

And no man living could endure a fourth.

My dear sir shrew, Jesu cut short your life!

You preach away and say a hateful wife

Is reckoned to be one of these misfortunes.

Is there no other trouble that importunes

The world and that your parables could condemn?

Must an unhappy wife be one of them?

"Then you compared a woman's love to Hell,

To barren land where water will not dwell,

And you compared it to a quenchless fire,

The more it burns the more is its desire

To burn up everything that burnt can be.

You say that just as worms destroy a tree

A wife destroys her husband and contrives,

As husbands know, the ruin of their lives."

'Such was the way, my lords, you understand

I kept my older husbands well in hand.

I told them they were drunk and their unfiness

To judge my conduct forced me to take witness

That they were lying. Johnny and my niece

Would back me up. O Lord, I wrecked their peace,

Innocent as they were, without remorse!

For I could bite and whinney like a horse

And launch complaints when things were all my fault;

I'd have been lost if I had called a halt.

First to the mill is first to grind your corn;

I attacked first and they were overcome,

Glad to apologize and even suing

Pardon for what they'd never thought of doing.

'I'd tackle one for wenching, out of hand,

Although so ill the man could hardly stand,

Yet he felt flattered in his heart because

He thought it showed how fond of him I was.

I swore that all my walking out at night

Was just to keep his wenching well in sight.

That was a dodge that made me shake with mirth;

But all such wit is given us at birth.

Lies, tears and spinning are the things God gives

By nature to a woman, while she lives.

So there's one thing at least that I can boast,

That in the end I always ruled the roast;

Cunning or force was sure to make them stumble,

And always keeping up a steady grumble.

'But bed-time above all was their misfortune;

That was the place to scold them and importune

And baulk their fun. I never would abide

In bed with them if hands began to slide

Till they had promised ransom, paid a fee:

And then I let them do their nicety.

And so I tell this tale to every man,

"It's all for sale and let him win who can."

No empty-handed man can lure a bird.

His pleasures were my profit; I concurred,

Even assumed fictitious appetite,

Though bacon never gave me much delight.

And that's the very fact that made me chide them.

And had the Pope been sitting there beside them

I wouldn't have spared them at their very table,

But paid them out as far as I was able.

I say, so help me God Omnipotent,

Were I to make my will and testament

I owe them nothing, paid them word for word  
 Putting my wits to use, and they preferred  
 To give it up and take it for the best  
 For otherwise they would have got no rest.  
 Though they might glower like a maddened beast  
 They got no satisfaction, not the least.

'I then would say, "My dear, just take a peep!  
 What a meek look on Willikin our sheep!  
 Come nearer, husband, let me kiss your cheek;  
 You should be just as patient, just as meek;  
 Sweeten your heart. Your conscience needs a probe.  
 You're fond of preaching patience out of job,  
 And so be patient; practise what you preach,  
 And if you don't, my dear, we'll have to teach  
 You that it's nice to have a quiet life.  
 One of us must be master, man or wife,  
 And since a man's more reasonable, he  
 Should be the patient one, you must agree.

"What ails you, man, to grumble so and groan?  
 Just that you want my what-not all your own?  
 Why, take it all, man, take it, every bit!  
 St Peter, what a love you have for it!  
 For if I were to sell my *belle chose*,  
 I could go walking fresher than a rose;  
 But I will keep it for your private tooth.  
 By God, you are to blame, and that's the truth."

"That's how my first three husbands were undone.  
 Now let me tell you of my last but one.

'He was a reveller, was number four,  
 That is to say he kept a paramour.  
 Young, strong and stubborn, I was full of rage  
 And jolly as a magpie in a cage.  
 Play me the harp and I would dance and sing,  
 Believe me, like a nightingale in spring,  
 If I had had a draught of sweetened wine.  
 Metellius, that filthy lout – the swine  
 Who snatched a staff and took his woman's life  
 For drinking wine – if I had been his wife

He never would have daunted me from drink.  
 Whenever I take wine I have to think  
 Of Venus, for as cold engenders hail  
 A lecherous mouth begets a lecherous tail.  
 A woman in her cups has no defence,  
 As lechers know from long experience.

'But Christ! Whenever it comes back to me,  
 When I recall my youth and jollity,  
 It fairly warms the cockles of my heart!  
 This very day I feel a pleasure start,  
 Yes, I can feel it tickling at the root.  
 Lord, how it does me good! I've had my fruit,  
 I've had my world and time, I've had my fling!  
 But age that comes to poison everything  
 Has taken all my beauty and my pith.  
 Well, let it go, the devil go therewith!  
 The flour is gone, there is no more to say,  
 And I must sell the bran as best I may;  
 But still I mean to find my way to fun. . . .  
 Now let me tell you of my last but one.

'I told you how it filled my heart with spite  
 To see another woman his delight,  
 By God and all His saints I made it good!  
 I carved him out a cross of the same wood,  
 Not with my body in a filthy way,  
 But certainly by seeming rather gay  
 To others, frying him in his own grease  
 Of jealousy and rage; he got no peace.  
 By God on earth I was his purgatory,  
 For which I hope his soul may be in glory.  
 God knows he sang a sorry tune, he flinched,  
 And bitterly enough, when the shoe pinched.  
 And God and he alone can say how grim,  
 How many were the ways I tortured him.

'He died when I came back from Jordan Stream  
 And he lies buried under the rood-beam,  
 Albeit that his tomb can scarce supply us  
 With such a show as that of King Darius

— Apelles sculpted it in a sumptuous taste —  
Expensive funerals are just a waste.

Farewell to him. God give his spirit rest!  
He's in his grave, he's nailed up in his chest.

'Now of my fifth, last husband let me tell.  
God never let his soul be sent to Hell!

And yet he was my worst, and many a blow  
He struck me still can ache along my row  
Of ribs, and will until my dying day.

'But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,  
So coaxing, so persuasive. . . . Heaven knows  
Whenever he wanted it — my *belle chose* —

Though he had beaten me in every bone  
He still could wheedle me to love, I own.  
I think I loved him best, I'll tell no lie.

He was disdainful in his love, that's why.  
We women have a curious fantasy  
In such affairs, or so it seems to me.

When something's difficult, or can't be had,  
We crave and cry for it all day like mad.  
Forbid a thing, we pine for it all night,

Press fast upon us and we take to flight;  
We use disdain in offering our wars.  
A throng of buyers sends prices up at fairs,

Cheap goods have little value, they suppose;  
And that's a thing that every woman knows.  
'My fifth and last — God keep his soul in health!

The one I took for love and not for wealth,  
Had been at Oxford not so long before  
But had left school and gone to lodge next door,

Yes, it was to my godmother's he'd gone.  
God bless her soul! *Her* name was Alison.  
She knew my heart and more of what I thought

Than did the parish priest, and so she ought!  
She was my confidante, I told her all.  
For had my husband pissed against a wall

Or done some crime that would have cost his life,  
To her and to another worthy wife

And to my niece, because I loved her well,  
I'd have told everything there was to tell.

And so I often did, and Heaven knows  
It used to set him blushing like a rose  
For shame, and he would blame his lack of sense  
In telling me secrets of such consequence.

'And so one time it happened that in Lent,  
As I so often did, I rose and went  
To see her, ever wanting to be gay

And go a-strolling, March, April and May,  
From house to house for chat and village malice.

'Johnny (the boy from Oxford) and Dame Alice  
And I myself, into the fields we went.  
My husband was in London all that Lent;

All the more fun for me — I only mean  
The fun of seeing people and being seen  
By cocky lads; for how was I to know

Where or what graces Fortune might bestow?  
And so I made a round of visitations,  
Went to processions, festivals, orations,

Preachments and pilgrimages, watched the carriages  
They use for plays and pageants, went to marriages,  
And always wore my gayest scarlet dress.

'These worms, these moths, these mites, I must confess,  
Got little chance to eat it, by the way.  
Why not? Because I wore it every day.

'Now let me tell you all that came to pass.  
We sauntered in the meadows through the grass  
Toying and dallying to such extent,

Johnny and I, that I grew provident  
And I suggested, were I ever free  
And made a widow, he should marry me.

And certainly — I do not mean to boast —  
I ever was more provident than most  
In marriage matters and in other such.

I never think a mouse is up to much;  
That only has one hole in all the house;  
If that should fail, well, it's good-bye the mouse.

'I let him think I was as one enchanted  
(That was a trick my godmother implanted)  
And told him I had dreamt the night away  
Thinking of him, and dreamt that as I lay  
He tried to kill me. Blood had drenched the bed.

"But still it was a lucky dream," I said,  
"For blood betokens gold as I recall."

It was a lie. I hadn't dreamt at all.

'Twas from my godmother I learnt my lore  
In matters such as that, and many more.

'Well, let me see . . . what had I to explain?  
Aha! By God, I've got the thread again.

'When my fourth husband lay upon his bier  
I wept all day and looked as drear as drear,  
As widows must, for it is quite in place,  
And with a handkerchief I hid my face.  
Now that I felt provided with a mate  
I wept but little, I need hardly state.

'To church they bore my husband on the morrow  
With all the neighbours round him venting sorrow,  
And one of them of course was handsome Johnny.  
So help me God, I thought he looked so bonny  
Behind the coffin! Heavens, what a pair  
Of legs he had! Such feet, so clean and fair!  
I gave my whole heart up, for him to hold.  
He was, I think, some twenty winters old,  
And I was forty then, to tell the truth.  
But still, I always had a coltish tooth.  
Yes, I'm gap-toothed; it suits me well I feel,  
It is the print of Venus and her seal.  
So help me God I was a lusty one,  
Fair, young and well-to-do, and full of fun!  
And truly, as my husbands said to me  
I had the finest *quoniam* that might be.  
For Venus sent me feeling from the stars  
And my heart's boldness came to me from Mars.  
Venus gave me desire and lecherousness  
And Mars my hardihood, or so I guess,

Born under Taurus and with Mars therein.

Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!  
I ever followed natural inclination  
Under the power of my constellation  
And was unable to deny, in truth,  
My chamber of Venus to a likely youth.  
The mark of Mars is still upon my face  
And also in another privy place.

For as I may be saved by God above,  
I never used discretion when in love  
But ever followed on my appetite,  
Whether the lad was short, long, black or white.  
Little I cared, if he was fond of me,

How poor he was, or what his rank might be.

'What shall I say? Before the month was gone  
This gay young student, my delightful John,  
Had married me in solemn festival.

I handed him the money, lands and all  
That ever had been given me before;  
This I repented later, more and more.  
None of my pleasures would he let me seek.  
By God, he smote me once upon the cheek  
Because I tore a page out of his book,  
And that's the reason why I'm deaf. But look,  
Stubborn I was, just like a lioness;

As to my tongue, a very wrangleress.  
I went off gadding as I had before  
From house to house, however much he swore.  
Because of that he used to preach and scold,  
Drag Roman history up from days of old,  
How one Simplicius Gallus left his wife,  
Deserting her completely all his life,  
Only for poking out her head one day  
Without a hat, upon the public way.

'Some other Roman – I forget his name –  
Because his wife went to a summer's game  
Without his knowledge, left her in the lurch.  
'And he would take the Bible up and search

For proverbs in Ecclesiasticus,  
Particularly one that has it thus:

"Suffer no wicked woman to gad about."

And then would come the saying (need you doubt?)

*A man who seeks to build his house of sallows,*

*A man who spurs a blind horse over fallows,*

*Or lets his wife make pilgrimage to Hallowes,*

*Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.*

But all for naught. I didn't give a hen

For all his proverbs and his wise old men.

Nor would I take rebuke at any price;

I hate a man who points me out my vice,

And so, God knows, do many more than I.

That drove him raging mad, you may rely.

Nor more would I forbear him, I can promise.

'Now let me tell you truly by St Thomas

About that book and why I tore the page

And how he smote me deaf in very rage.

'He had a book, he kept it on his shelf,

And night and day he read it to himself

And laughed aloud, although it was quite serious.

He called it *Theophrastus and Valerius*.\*

There was another Roman, much the same,

A cardinal, St Jerome was his name.

He wrote a book against Jovinian,

Bound up together with Tertullian,

Chrysippus, Troilus and Heloise,

An abbes, lived near Paris. And with these

Were bound the parables of Solomon,

With Ovid's *Art of Love* another one.

All these were bound together in one book

And day and night he used to take a look

At what it said, when he had time and leisure

Or had no occupation but his pleasure,

Which was to read this book of wicked wives;

He knew more legends of them and their lives

Than there are good ones mentioned in the Bible.

For take my word for it, there is no libel

On women that the clergy will not paint,  
Except when writing of a woman-saint,

But never good of other women, though.

Who called the lion savage? Do you know?

By God, if women had but written stories

Like those the clergy keep in oratories,

More had been written of man's wickedness

Than all the sons of Adam could redress.

Children of Mercury\* and we of Venus

Keep up the contrariety between us;

Mercury stands for wisdom, thrift and science,

Venus for revel, squandering and defiance.

Their several natures govern their direction;

One rises when the other's in dejection.

So Mercury is desolate when halted

In Pisces, just where Venus is exalted,

And Venus falls where Mercury is raised,

And women therefore never can be praised

By learned men, old scribes who cannot do

The works of Venus more than my old shoe.

These in their dotage sit them down to frowse

And say that women break their marriage-vows!

'Now to my purpose as I told you; look,

Here's how I got a beating for a book.

One evening Johnny, glowering with ire,

Sat with his book and read it by the fire.

And first he read of Eve whose wickedness

Brought all mankind to sorrow and distress,

Root-cause why Jesus Christ Himself was slain

And gave His blood to buy us back again.

Aye, there's the text where you expressly find

That woman brought the loss of all mankind.

'He read me then how Samson as he slept

Was shorn of all his hair by her he kept,

And by that treachery Samson lost his eyes.

And then he read me, if I tell no lies,

All about Hercules and Deianire;

She tricked him into setting himself on fire.

'He left out nothing of the miseries  
Occasioned by his wives to Socrates.

Xantippe poured a piss-pot on his head.  
The silly man sat still, as he were dead,

Wiping his head, but dared no more complain

Than say, "Ere thunder stops, down comes the rain."

'Next of Pasiphaë the Queen of Crete,\*

For wickedness he thought that story sweet;

Fie, say no more! It has a grisly sting,

Her horrible lust. How could she do the thing!

'And then he told of Clytemnestra's lechery

And how she made her husband die by treachery.

He read that story with a great devotion.

'He read me what occasioned the commotion

By which Amphiaräus lost his life;

My husband had a legend about his wife

Eriphyle, who for a gaud in gold

Went to the Greeks in secret, and she told

Them where to find him, in what hiding-place.

At Thebes it was he met with sorry grace.

'Of Livia and Lucilia then he read,

And both of course had killed their husbands dead,

The one for love, the other out of hate.

Livia prepared some poison for him late

One evening and she killed him out of spite,

Lucilia out of lecherous delight.

For she, in order he might only think

Of her, prepared an aphrodisiac drink;

He drank it and was dead before the morning.

Such is the fate of husbands; it's a warning.

'And then he told how one Latunius

Lamented to his comrade Arrius

That in his orchard-plot there grew a tree

On which his wives had hanged themselves, all three,

Or so he said, out of some spite or other;

To which this Arrius replied, "Dear brother,

Give me a cutting from that blessed tree

And planted in my garden it shall be!"

'Of wives of later date he also read,

How some had killed their husbands when in bed,

Then night-long with their lechers played the whore,

While the poor corpse lay fresh upon the floor.

'One drove a nail into her husband's brain

While he was sleeping, and the man was slain;

Others put poison in their husbands' drink.

He spoke more harm of us than heart can think

And knew more proverbs too, for what they're worth,

Than there are blades of grass upon the earth.

"Better," says he, "to share your habitation

With lion, dragon, or abomination

Than with a woman given to reproof.

Better," says he, "take refuge on the roof

Than with an angry wife, down in the house;

They are so wicked and cantankerous

They hate the things their husbands like," he'd say.

"A woman always casts her shame away

When she casts off her smock, and that's in haste.

A pretty woman, if she isn't chaste,

Is like a golden ring in a sow's snout."

'Who could imagine, who could figure out

The torture in my heart? It reached the top

And when I saw that he would never stop

Reading this cursed book, all night no doubt,

I suddenly grabbed and tore three pages out

Where he was reading, at the very place,

And fisted such a buffet in his face

That backwards down into our fire he fell.

"Then like a maddened lion, with a yell

He started up and smote me on the head,

And down I fell upon the floor for dead.

'And when he saw how motionless I lay

He was aghast and would have fled away,

But in the end I started to come to.

"O have you murdered me, you robber, you,

To get my land?" I said. "Was that the game?

Before I'm dead I'll kiss you all the same."



'He came up close and kneeling gently down  
He said, "My love, my dearest Alison,  
So help me God, I never again will hit  
You, love; and if I did, you asked for it.  
Forgive me!" But for all he was so meek,  
I up at once and smote him on the cheek  
And said, "Take that to level up the score!  
Now let me die, I can't speak any more."

'We had a morn of trouble and heavy weather  
But in the end we made it up together.  
He gave the bridle over to my hand,  
Gave me the government of house and land,  
Of tongue and fist, indeed of all he'd got.  
I made him burn that book upon the spot.  
And when I'd mastered him, and out of deadlock  
Secured myself the sovereignty in wellock,  
And when he said, "My own and truest wife,  
Do as you please for all the rest of life,  
But guard your honour and my good estate,"  
From that day forward there was no debate.  
So help me God I was as kind to him  
As any wife from Denmark to the rim  
Of India, and as true. And he to me.  
And I pray God that sits in majesty  
To bless his soul and fill it with his glory.  
Now, if you'll listen, I will tell my story.'

### Words between the Summoner and the Friar

The Friar laughed when he had heard all this.  
'Well, Ma'am,' he said, 'as God may send me bliss,  
This is a long preamble to a tale!'  
But when the Summoner heard the Friar rail,  
'Just look!' he cried, 'by the two arms of God!  
These meddling friars are always on the prod!  
Don't we all know a friar and a fly  
Go prod and buzz in every dish and pie!

What do you mean with your "preamblement"?  
Amble yourself, trot, do a meditation!  
You're spoiling all our fun with your commotion.'  
The Friar smiled and said, 'Is that your motion?  
I promise on my word before I go  
To find occasion for a tale or so  
About a summoner that will make us laugh.'  
'Well, damn your eyes, and on my own behalf,'  
The Summoner answered, 'mine be damned as well  
If I can't think of several tales to tell  
About the friars that will make you mourn  
Before we get as far as Sittingbourne.  
Have you no patience? Look, he's in a huff!  
Our Host called out, 'Be quiet, that's enough!  
Shut up, and let the woman tell her tale.  
You must be drunk, you've taken too much ale.  
Now, Ma'am, you go ahead and no demur.'  
'All right,' she said, 'it's just as you prefer,  
If I have licence from this worthy friar.'  
'Nothing,' said he, 'that I should more desire.'

### The Wife of Bath's Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days  
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)  
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.  
The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke  
Their elfin dance on many a green mead,  
Or so was the opinion once, I read,  
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.  
But no one now sees fairies any more.  
For now the saintly charity and prayer  
Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;  
They search the countryside through field and stream  
As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,  
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,  
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,