

Chaucer's advice to Bukton

Geoffrey Chaucer

late-fourteenth century short poem in Middle English

Translated and interpreted in Modern English prose

by

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Chaucer's advice to Bukton

Geoffrey Chaucer
late fourteenth century

The council of Chaucer touching Mariage, which was sent to Bukton.

My maister Bukton, whan of Criste out kinge · Was axed, what is trouthe or sothfastness, · he nat a word answerde to that axinge –

When my master Bukton was asked, regarding Christ, what is the truth, not a word did he answer in reply; like someone who might have wished to say, 'No man is all true,' I guess. And therefore, although I promise to express the sorrow and woe that is in marriage, I dare not write wickedly of it, lest I myself soon fall into such foolishness. I will not liken it to the chain with which Satan was bound, and on which he gnawed unendingly, but I dare say, were he released from this torture, he would never freely be bound again. But the weak-headed fool who would rather be chained in prison than escape from it, let God never release him from his woe, nor any one cry in sympathy for him.

But yet, lest you do worse, take a wife. Better it is to wed than to burn. But you shall have sorrow all your life and be your wife's anxious servant, as has been seen. And if Holy Scripture does nothing for you, experience may teach you, perhaps, that it would be better to be captured in free Fresia than to fall into the trap of marriage.

Lenvoye

This little guiding metaphor I send you and I advise you to keep it safe. Unwise is he who can suffer no happiness. If you are sure and steady, then there is no need to fear. Read in my 'Wife of Bath' of this matter that we have in hand. God grant you your life to live freely, for it is unpleasant to suffer imprisonment.

This enigmatic poem addressed to 'Bukton', possibly a Sir Peter Bukton of Holderness, in East Yorkshire, appears at first sight to be a warning by Chaucer against marriage, in a light-hearted and joking way. Perhaps Bukton was about to get married.

Hannah sees another interpretation. She sees it as a warning by Chaucer, not against marriage but against revealing doubts about the Christian faith. Chaucer is warning Bukton that it is better to pretend to be a good Christian than to suffer imprisonment or one of the other harsh punishments for heresy. 'The Wyf of Bath' refers to the tale rather than the prologue. 'Frisie' is free Fresia, and it may be better for him to go there if he cannot keep up the pretence.

It is, after all, as Chaucer makes clear in the envoy, 'a litte writ, proverbes, or figure'. A metaphor. Where is the metaphor if it's only about Bukton's impending marriage?

