

Canterbury Tales

Wife of Bath's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

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richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



The Prologue of the Wyves Tale of Bathe

‘**E**xperience, though noon auctoritee were in this world, were right y-nough to me to speke of wo that is in marriage – Even if there were no respected opinions on this matter in the whole world, experience would be enough for me to speak of the sorrow that is in marriage. Lords, ladies and gentlemen, since the age of twelve I have had five husbands, may the Lord of Eternal Life be thanked. Yes, I have been married this many times, and all of my husbands were worthy men in their own walk of life. But not long ago I was told that because Christ only went once to a wedding, near Galilee, that by this example he meant to tell me that I should have been married only once.

‘Listen also to the harsh words that Jesus had for a Samaritan woman beside a well. He who was God and man said: “You have had five husbands, and the man who is with you now is not your husband.” God above! Jesus said this, although what he meant by it I cannot say. But I ask you all: Why was the fifth man not her husband? How many men might she have in marriage? In all my years, I have never heard a definitive answer to this question, however busily men look into crystal balls or try to pull hidden meanings from obscure texts.

‘But I know one thing for sure. God commanded us to go out and multiply. The meaning of this simple text seems clear enough to me. I also know that God said that my husband should leave his father and mother and take me, but he made no mention of any number that I’m aware of. So why should men speak harshly of bigamy, or even polygamy? What about King Solomon? He was wise and had more than one wife. I wish I could be refreshed lawfully with sex half as often as he was! What gift of God did he possess, to keep all his wives happy? No man has it now, that’s for sure!

‘God knows, I bet this noble king had many a romp in the hay on his wedding knight with each of his wives! I bet he had so much energy! God be blessed that I’ve married five. Welcome the sixth, whenever he comes along, that’s what I say! I refuse to keep myself chaste now that my husband has passed away. I shall remarry a Christian man as soon as I can, for the apostle Paul has said that I’m free to marry whenever I choose. He

Often, more attention is paid to the prologue of the Wife of Bath's tale than to the tale itself. In a long preamble, Alison describes her five successive husbands and the controlling nature of her relationship with them. She appears to have had quite a happy life, and her husbands have never been denied their oats, which seems at odds with any cautionary note against marriage that the tale might contain. The tale itself is set in the age of King Arthur and tells a story that is found in ancient Irish tales of Fionn mac Cumhaill, in which an old hag is invited beneath a warrior's blanket where she promptly turns into a beautiful young woman. An old woman, and a young and beautiful one, are one and the same.

This tale from the Wife of Bath follows the tale from the Man of Law in the Ellesmere MS and Harley MS, although Skeat places it after the Pardoner's tale. It is another of Geoffrey's Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

said that it's no sin to be married. Better to be married than to burn, he said. What do I care, then, if folk criticise and disparage Lamech in the Bible because he had two wives? Abraham was a holy man, and Jacob a well, as far as I'm aware, and each of them had more than two wives; and there were many other holy men like them as well. When did you ever hear, throughout all of history, that God ever forbade marriage? Tell me that! When did he ever command celibacy?

'Saint Paul, when he spoke of virginity, admitted that he had no precedent for what he said. Men may advise a woman to remain a virgin, but that's not a command. God has let us choose for ourselves; for if he had ever commanded celibacy, then he must therefore have damned marriage as well and certainly, if no children are born, how can there ever be any virgins in the first place? Even Saint Paul shied away from prohibiting what his master had never forbidden. It is as though a prize has been set up, to be awarded to the cleanest virgin – let those who wish to compete for it do so. Let's see who runs the fastest! But this race isn't for everyone. For anyone who feels the call, let them go for it. I won't be among them.

'Saint Paul was a virgin, I know. But although he expressed the opinion that he wanted everybody to be like him, it was just his advice – take it or leave it. He let me make my own mind up whether I wanted to be married or not. He allowed me to marry again if my husband dies, so long as it involves no bigamy. And although he thought it good if a man refrains from touching a woman in ways that might lead them on to other things, because it's dangerous to bring bales of greasy wool and fire together in one place – you know what this example resembles.

'Well, even if Saint Paul regarded virginity as nobler than marriage, as far as the frailty of the flesh goes, I regard it as weak and feeble when he and she should wish to lead their entire married lives in chastity. I quite accept that virginity is preferred by many, but it's not for me. These virgins like to be clean, both in body and soul, and I make no such boasts about myself. You know well enough that a lord in his manor doesn't have every serving dish made of gold; some are made of wood and are quite serviceable for all that.

'God calls folk to him in many different ways and everybody receives from him a fitting gift, some this, some that, just as he likes. Virginity is a very commendable thing I'm sure. But Christ, who is the very source of perfection, didn't ask us all to go and give everything we have to the poor and follow his own path each and every step of the way. He spoke to those who wished to live a perfect life; and by your leave my lords and ladies, I am not one of those. I was happy to let the blossom of my youth develop into that sweet fruit that is to be found in marriage!

'Tell me this – why are men and women given sex organs? Why were men and women formed differently in the first place? I can't believe that it was for nothing. Some men may try to convince you that their willies were made solely for urinating and their balls only so that a male and a female could be told apart, and for no other reason. Do you

believe this? Experience tells us to reject such fairy stories! But so that clerics won't be angry with me, I shall concede that they have a dual function, that is, for urinating and for pleasure at procreation. But why else would it be written in books that a man should pay his debt to his wife? How else can he make his payment except by using his laughable little rod to shaft her with? So there is the proof: they were fashioned by God for urinating and also for procreation.

'I'm not saying that every man with a cock should go about using it, willy-nilly – ha ha. That would be taking things too far. Christ was a virgin, although formed like a man, and many saints have been as well, all down the ages, and they managed to live an unblemished life of chastity. But I feel no envy towards virgins; let them be the bread of pure wheat while us wives are just common barley bread. Mark says in his gospel that Our Lord Jesus fed many a man with barley bread; so I shall continue in the life that God has ordained for me.

'I'm no perfectionist. In wifehood, I shall exercise my vagina as freely as God gave it to me; and if I'm in danger of leading anyone astray then God give me sorrow, but my husband shall have it whenever he wants! I shall have a husband who is both my debtor and my slave, and his work will be physically demanding and exhausting, I can assure you! I shall have control over his body, not he; at least, that's what Saint Paul told me, when he advised our husbands to love us well. I like that idea.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake!' interrupted the pardoner. 'By God and Saint John! You make a good preacher! I was about to get married, alas, but I think I've changed my mind now!'

'Shut up!' replied the Wife of Bath. 'I haven't even started my tale yet. No, you'll be drinking from another barrel before I've finished and taste worse than ale. And when I've told you of the misery in marriage, of which I'm an expert, that's to say, the one who dishes it all out, then you may want to beware approaching that barrel too closely, for I shall give you more than ten examples, and the man who will not learn from examples is likely, himself, to become an example to others, as Ptolemy wrote in his *Almagest*.'

'Madam,' said the pardoner. 'I'm sorry, please carry on. Tell us your tale and hold nothing back. Give us younger men a few tips.'

'Gladly,' she replied, 'if that's what you want. But I ask all this company, please don't be offended by anything that I say. I'm simply giving free rein to my fantasies. I mean it all in fun.

'And now everybody, ladies and gentlemen, I shall tell you all my tale.

'As surely as I drink wine and ale, I'm telling you the truth when I say that, of all my husbands, three of them were good and two were bad. The three who were good were rich and old. They were so old that they were barely able to pay the debt that was due to me. I'm sure you know what I mean. So help me God, it makes me laugh now to think how pitilessly I made them work all through the night, but I didn't care. They had given

to me all their money and their land and there was no further need for me to win their love or to look up to them. They loved me so much that I had no need to compliment them.

‘A wise woman, when she finds herself without a man, will set her heart upon a single man and get him. But since I had one wholly in my hand and each had given me all that he possessed, what need had I to please him or to do what he told me to, except where it suited me? So I set them to work, by my faith! Many a night, their cry was: ‘No more! No more!’

Not for them the prize in Essex for couples who have never quarrelled. I think they offer a flitch of bacon to any newly-married couple who can last a year without arguing. They brought me prizes enough, though. I governed each of them so well that they were all happy to bring me pretty gifts from the fair. They loved it when I spoke nicely to them; although God knows, I could give them an earful too, when I wanted to.



Now listen to how appropriately I behaved, you wise wives who can understand what I’m saying. This is the way you should speak to them, husbands I mean – falsely accuse them of things for a start. No man is ever half as bold in his swearing and in his lying as a woman is; I mean, those wives who haven’t been quite as wise as they might have been. A wise woman, if she knows her stuff, will swear anything she likes to her husband and get the support of her maid to corroborate it. I’d say something like:

“‘You old fool, is this your idea of fine clothes?’” lifting my gown for him to see. “‘Why is my neighbour’s wife so smartly dressed? She’s honoured wherever she goes, while I sit at home mending rags! What do you do over there at her house, anyway? Is she so attractive? Are you such a catch? What dirty suggestions have you been whispering to the maid? God preserve us! Sir Old Lecher! It’s no use joking about it! If I have a man I like to be friendly with, nothing else, just friends, you castigate me like the devil himself if you discover me in his house. You come home drunk, start pontificating like a judge on the basis of your flimsy evidence and complain: ‘It’s a great expense to marry a poor woman and if she’s rich, its torture to have to suffer her arrogance and moodiness!’ And if she’s beautiful, you accuse her of being the object of every lecher’s desire! ‘She can’t keep her chastity when so many men are trying to batter down her defences from every direction,’ you insinuate. Some folk desire us for our wealth, you say, others for our curvaceous figures, or for our beauty, or because we can sing and dance or because we are courteous and refined, or if we have a beautiful complexion. And if she’s ugly, you say that she’s after every man there is, ready to leap into his breeches like a spaniel if he shows the slightest interest in her. ‘There’s no goose in the lake without a mate,’ you point out, ‘however grey and plain she is. It’s a difficult business controlling something that you are

reluctant to get your arms around,' you joke. So we're all at it, by your account! 'There's no castle wall that won't fall if its besieged for long enough,' you whine."

"You say that crumbling masonry, smoky rooms and scolding wives drive a man from his house. For heaven's sake! Does dementia make an old man say such things? You say that we wives hide our vices until we are secure in marriage, and only then do we reveal them. That's the proverb of a contemptible bastard! You say that oxen, horses, dogs and sheep are all vetted before being sold, basins and piss pots checked for cracks and blemishes before they are bought, spoons and chairs and other such hardware tested for utility, but wives are never checked for imperfections until the wedding is over. Only then, you say, are all our vices revealed, when it's too late. You asshole!

"You accuse me of getting dreadfully upset if you don't constantly praise my beauty or stare lovingly into my eyes or look at my face all the time or call me your 'honey' everywhere you go; or if you forget my birthday or give me a present I don't like, or if you're not generous to my old nurse and my chambermaid, and all my father's family and all his friends. This is what you say, you barrelful of lies!

"You're suspicious even of our young apprentice, Jankin! God, you're jealous of Jankin! Is this because of his curly hair which falls like fine gold and because he accompanies me whenever I'm out and about? But I wouldn't go with him even if you died tomorrow. And tell me this? Why do you hide away the keys to your chest? It's my wealth as well as yours, you know. And why do you try to make me look a fool? By Saint James, you won't get both my body and my money, however mad at me you may get. You'll have to forgo one of them, that's for sure! Why do you spy on me all the time? I reckon you would lock me in your chest if you could! But this is what you ought to say: 'Wife, go where you want to and enjoy yourself. I won't listen to any gossip about you. I know that you are faithful to me, my dear Alison.'

"We resent anyone watching over us all the time," I would tell him. "We like to be free. Of all men, that wise astrologer Ptolemy should be praised the most, for penning a proverb in his Almagest which goes something like: 'The most intelligent man of all is the one who doesn't give a damn who governs the world.' By this he means, that if you're contented with what you have, what does it matter to you what other folk are doing? If you wish to, you old fool, you can have whatever you like after supper, so why worry yourself further? A man is hugely stingy if he refuses to let a man light a candle beside his own lantern. He won't have any less light because of it. If you're getting enough, don't complain!

"You also say that when we make ourselves look attractive with some pretty clothes and some nice jewellery, then it's to the peril of our souls. You even bolster up this spurious notion with some words of Saint Paul: 'A woman should dress herself up in clothes made through chastity and shame, not with delicate hairstyles and lavish pearls, gold thread and expensive silks.' But I don't give a gnat for your texts! Or for your doctrines! You say that I'm like a cat, that when a man sings a cat's fur the animal stays at home, but when

she's licked herself all over and looks sleek and tidy, she won't stay in the house for half a day but will be out and about before dawn, flaunting herself in front of all the toms. Are you trying to say, Sir Bastard, that I make myself look attractive only because I want to go out and show off my tits to all the men?

“You old fool, what's wrong with you, that you spy on me all the time? Even if you were to ask Argus with his hundred eyes to guard over me, he could only do it if I wanted him to! For all his eyes, I'd get the better of him, be under no illusion. You tell me that there are three things that torment this Earth and four things which it cannot endure, and one of these is a hateful wife. Oh my dear Sir Tossplot, may Jesus fetch you early to your grave! Are there no other things that you can throw parables at except foolish wives? You say a woman's love is like hell, or like a barren desert where there's no water. You liken it to wildfire because the more it sets alight, the more it desires to burn. You say that just as worms destroy a tree, so a wife destroys her husband.”

‘And so I go on. In this way, ladies and gentlemen, I was able to rebuff all my old husbands. I accused them of saying things in their drunkenness that they had never said. None of it was true. But I got Jankin and my niece to back me up on it. Oh lord, the pain and sorrow I brought to them, and they were completely innocent, by God's



sweet Passion! I could bite and kick like a horse. I would complain, even when I was as guilty as sin, or otherwise I would have been caught out many times. The first to arrive at the mill gets first go at the grindstone, that's what I say! I went quickly onto the offensive and won the battle every time as a result. They were soon quite willing to apologise for things they had never done. I would accuse them of having women behind my back, even when one of them was so sick he could hardly stand! But it pleased him to think that I loved him so much that I could get as jealous as I was. I would swear that all my walking

out at night was to make sure that he wasn't seeing any other women. This ruse stood me in good stead for a long while. We women are born to this sort of cunning. Deceit, weeping, spinning a long yarn – God has given us all these gifts by nature, to our lives' end.

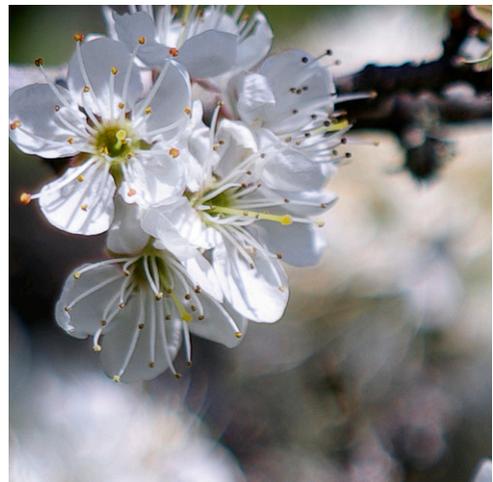
‘I can boast of one thing: I would always get the better of them in the end. Either by cunning or by force, or in some other way, like going on and on about something, or – and this is the best one – by spoiling their bedtimes, grumbling and getting out of bed if I felt an arm go around me and refusing to play. I wouldn't let him do what he wanted to until I had had my capitulation; only then could he do those intimate things with me again.

‘I can tell this to every man: grab what you can, for everything has its price. You can't attract a hawk to you if you've nothing in your hand. I could endure any amount of bad

lovmaking if I thought the reward was going to be worth it. I'd make a pretence that I was enjoying it. It was never my ambition to win that flitch of bacon, though. Even if the Pope himself had been sitting in my kitchen, I would have shouted at my husband if I'd wanted to. Upon my honour, I could give as good as I got. If I was to make my final testament right here and now, I would swear that I owe them nothing that's not already been paid in full. I could get them to concede to anything, just to stop me from going on and on about it! Even if he was as angry as a lion, I would say: "My darling, see how meekly our old sheep Wilkin looks? Come here, my husband, and let me tickle your cheek! You should be patient, humble and at ease with yourself; you're always going on about the patience of Job so practice it, since you're so fond of talking about him! One of us must bow to the other, that's true, and since a man is the more reasonable of the two, it's up to you to show patience. So what's the matter with you, all this grumbling and complaining? Is it because you want my body? So take it! All of it! Saint Peter! By God, you're so fond of it! If I could get rid of my secret place, sell it perhaps, I'd go about smelling like a rose, but I keep it for you alone. You're incorrigible, I tell you."

'These are the words I used. But let me speak a little of my fourth husband.

'My fourth husband was a bit of a philanderer. He had a mistress, and I was young and full of energy, stubborn, strong-willed and as happy as a magpie. I could dance to the harp, and sing as well – like a nightingale – after a few cups of sweet wine. Even that pig Egnatius Metellius who killed his wife by beating her to death for drinking wine, if I'd been



his wife he wouldn't have stopped me from drinking! After wine, my thoughts would always turn to sex, for the one always led to the other with me. A woman full of wine has no defence, every man knows this from experience. But Christ! When I recall my youth, and all the things I got up to then, it makes me laugh. It does me good to think of it. But age, alas, which poisons us all, has taken my beauty from me, and my energy. Goodbye to all that! The devil take it! The flower has wilted, that's all there is to it.

'All I can do now is sell what bran I have left. All the wheat has gone. Yet I still have a good laugh about it. I won't let it get me down. Let me tell you about my fourth husband. It upset me a great deal that he took pleasure from another woman. But I got my own back, by God and Saint Judocus! A made a cross, from the same wood, for him to bear. I didn't go whoring, you understand, but still, I made enough men happy to be able to watch him fry in his own oil. He got so jealous! I was his purgatory on Earth, so I expect his soul is now in Bliss as a result of it. God knows, he sat and cried when the shoe started to pinch. No one but he and God knows the full extent I made him suffer.

'He died when I came back from Jerusalem and lies in his grave inside the church, beneath the rood beam. His tomb isn't as ornate as the one that Apelles made for King

Darius of Persia. That would have been wasted on him. I let him go with little more than a farewell, may his soul rest in peace. He's now in his grave, in his box.

'Now I shall tell you about my fifth husband, may God save his soul from hell. Of all my husbands he was the most violent – I still bear the marks on my ribs and will do so until the day I die. But in our bed he was so lively and energetic, and so persuasive when he wanted to make love to me, that even after he had beaten me black and blue he would quickly win my love again. I think I loved him best out of them all, because he didn't worship me and was always hard to please. We women, if we tell the truth, possess a curious ambivalence which makes us crave for things we cannot easily obtain and cry all day when we cannot possess them. Forbid us something, and we immediately want it more than anything else in the world. Offer us something for nothing and we'll run away from it. Only when prices are high do we put our goods on display. When there is a great crowd at a market, prices soar and anything that stays cheap is thought worthless. Every woman worth her salt knows this.

'I married my fifth husband for love and not for money. God bless him. He had been a student at Oxford but had returned home to lodge in our town with one of my god-siblings, my god-sister, may God receive her soul. Her name was Alison. She knew my mind and all my affairs better than the parish priest. Christ! I revealed everything to her! If my husband had pissed against a wall or done something bad enough to get himself hanged for it, I would have told her. Also my best friend, and also my niece whom I loved very much, I would have told them as well. The three of them would have got to learn of it for sure. And they did, often! My husband's face would go bright scarlet for shame, and he cursed himself for telling me his secrets.

'It happened once, during Lent – for I was particularly fond of visiting my god-sister in the springtime, to catch up with all her gossip, and I liked to be out and about when the weather had warmed up a bit – so it happened one day when the leaves were fresh and new that Jankin the cleric, Alison my god-sister and I myself, we all went out for a walk in the countryside. My fourth husband was in London at the time and was set to be away for a while, so that gave me the leisure to enjoy myself, to see and be seen by some handsome young men; and how was I to know what fortune might conjure up for me? So I was spending my time visiting, going to vigils and to processions, listening to sermons, travelling to shrines, watching miracle plays and attending weddings, and always in my best, scarlet dress. Moths didn't get a look in where my best clothes were concerned. I wore them all the time! Now I'll tell you what happened.

'As I said, we were walking in the fields and I struck up such a friendly and convivial conversation with this cleric Jankin that I was able to explain, jokingly, how, if I were to find myself a widow, then he could marry me. Certainly, I'm not boasting when I say that I never had any shortage of men wanting to marry me, and do other things to me as well. And I wouldn't give a leek for the heart of a mouse! That creature only has one nest to run to and if it can't reach it, it's done for! He had captured my heart so I spun him a yarn; my mother taught me that art. I told him that I had dreamed about him; he

had tried to kill me as I lay on the bed, the sheets were covered in blood, but all this was to the good, for blood signifies gold, I explained. It was all a fiction, it wasn't true, but I followed what my mother had taught me, in this and in many other things as well. But now, let me see, where was I? Oh yes.



‘When my fourth husband was lying on his bier, I wept a lot and looked miserable, for this is the custom with wives and it’s expected. I wore a veil, but I already knew where to look for number five and only cried a little bit really.

‘My husband was carried to the church the next day by the neighbours, who seemed genuinely upset to see him go. Jankin the student was one of those who helped to carry him; and so help me God, when I saw him following the box I thought that his legs and his feet were so handsome that I fell in love with him

in a moment. He was, I think, only twenty at this time, and I was forty, if the truth be told. But I’ve always been young at heart. I had a gap between my front teeth which was rather attractive – the imprint of Venus’s seal. I was full of life and sexual energy, rich and pretty, still relatively young and fond of pleasure; and my husbands had all said that I was absolutely unequalled down below, if you know what I mean. Certainly, I am all Venus as far as my feelings are concerned, but my heart belongs to Mars; Venus gave me my lust and my sexual appetite and Mars gave me my stern will and fearlessness. I have a red birthmark on my face, denoting the influence of Mars, and one in a more private place as well. Taurus was in the ascendant at my birth, and Mars was in that sign, as it happens.

‘Alas! Why has love been made out to be a sin? It’s true that I’ve never been able to deny my love to a handsome man, but in this, I’ve only been following my natural inclinations, given to me by the stars. May God be my salvation, but I’ve never fallen in love through choice. It just happens to me naturally. Be he short or tall, black or white, it didn’t matter how poor he was or from what station in life, so long as he liked me.

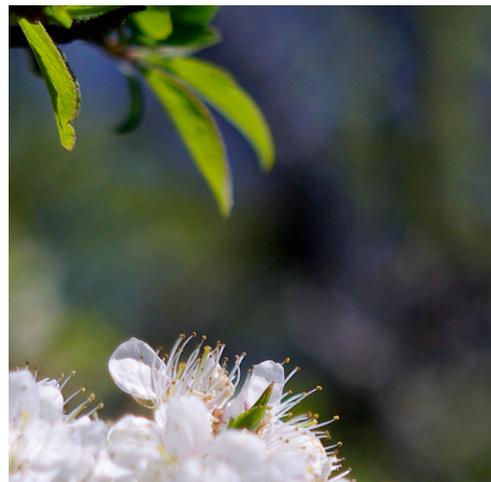
‘What more can I say? Before the month was out, this jolly student Jankin and I were married, with all due solemnity, and I gave to him all the worldly wealth that had been given to me by my four previous husbands. I was to regret this. He wouldn’t do anything I wanted him to. By God! He punched me once on the ear for ripping out one of the pages from his book and I was deaf in that ear for days afterwards and haven’t heard in it properly since. But I was always as ready to defend myself as a lioness. I was able to go out and spread gossip, too, if I wanted to. I would go out and enjoy myself just as before, although he tried to stop me from doing this. He would often preach to me, and tell me stories from the old Roman tales, like the one where Simplicius Gallus leaves his wife

and stays away from her for the rest of his life, only because he saw her walking from the house one day, bare-headed. And there was another one where a man's wife went to a festival one summer's day without telling him, and because of this he left her.

'Then he would search through his Bible and find that proverb in Ecclesiastes where it is forbidden that a woman should go gadding about. Then he would recite that ghastly poem: "The man who a sword from an empty sheath would draw, or spur a blind horse over a windswept moor, or let his wife out of the cottage door, deserves to get all that he's asking for."

'But it didn't do him any good. I didn't give a rose hip for any of his stupid proverbs or old tales. I wouldn't be corrected. I hate a man who tells me all my vices, and so do most other women as well! This made him angry at me. And that didn't help him either.

'By Saint Thomas! Let me tell you why I tore that page out of his book, so that he hit me and made me deaf. He had a book which he obviously enjoyed reading; he would pour over it, night and day. In it was something he called Theophrastus and Valerius and he used to laugh out loud as he was reading it. Also, there was something by a Roman cleric who was called Saint Jerome who wrote a piece against a heretic monk called Jovinian, and in this book also were the works of Tertullian, Chrysippus, Trotula and an abbess who lived near Paris whose name was Heloïse; also the parables of Solomon I think, and Ovid's *Art of Love* and many other works as well, all bound into a single volume. Night and day, whenever he had a few moments to spare, he would dip into this book, which was all about wicked wives. He learned from these stories more legends and tales of wicked wives than he did of good wives from the Bible, that's for sure. Believe me, it's impossible for a cleric for speak well of wives, except for those who happened to be holy saints like Saint Cecilia. There've been no other good wives at all, according to them.



'Who tells us that the lion is good? Men! But by God, if women had written stories, like clerics in their prayer closets, they would have written such slanderous things about men that no man in the world would be able to repudiate or properly answer them. Celibate scholars and the followers of Venus will never be reconciled. The children of Mercury love thriftiness, wisdom and science, while those of Venus love revelry and lavish expenditure. Because they are so different, each falls as the other rises; and thus, God knows, Mercury is desolate in Pisces, where Venus rises to her highest exultation, and Venus falls when Mercury is raised. No woman can expect, therefore, to receive a complement from a cleric. A scholar, when he is old and his attempts at the adoration due to Venus are worth no more than his old shoe, sits down and writes in his dotage about unfaithful and worthless wives. But I'm straying from the point. I shall tell you why I was beaten for the sake of that book.

‘One evening, Jankin, my lord and master, read this book as he sat beside the fire. First he read about Eve, who, through her wickedness the whole of humanity was brought into utter wretchedness, a condition which Jesus could only redress by being crucified and redeeming us with his precious blood. Lo! Here, then, it is expressly stated how women are the bane of all mankind! Then he read to me how Samson lost all his hair whilst he was sleeping; his mistress cut it off with her scissors and this caused him to lose both his eyes. Then he read to me – I’m not lying – about Hercules and his wife Deianeira, who caused him to set himself alight. He didn’t forget the misery that Socrates had with his two wives, how Xanthippe poured a jug of piss over his head one day; he lay absolutely still, like a corpse, then just wiped his head without saying anything except: “Before the thunder passes, it always rains.”

‘Then he told me about Pasiphae, who was the Queen of Crete; he thought it was a wonderful tale! Fy! I’ll say no more! But it was a dreadful thing she did with that bull, I must admit. He spoke of Clytaemnestra as well, who caused the death of her husband through her unfaithfulness and he related this story with some relish. He told me also how King Amphiaraus lost his life at Thebes, for in this book was a legend about this man’s wife Eriphyle who, for an ounce of gold, had given away to the Greeks the location where her husband was hiding. He told me about Livia and Lucia, who both caused the death of their husbands, the one through love, the other because she hated him. Livia poisoned her husband late one evening. Lucia, however, loved her husband so much that she gave

him a drink to make him frisky, but because of it, he was dead before the morning. The message is that wives always bring sorrow to their husbands.



‘He told me the joke about Latimius and Arius. Latimius confided to his friend Arius that he had a tree in his garden on which his three wives had all hanged themselves, through jealousy. “My dear friend,” said Arius, delightedly, “will you give me a cutting from this tree? I’ll plant it in my garden straight away!”

‘He told me about wives who had killed their husbands in bed and let their lovers have sex them all night while the corpse was still lying on the floor. Some had driven long nails into their husband’s brain while he slept. Others had put poison into his beer. He knew more proverbs on this subject than there are varieties of grass and herbs in all the world. Can you imagine the pain that I was feeling? At last, I’d had enough. When I saw that he seemed likely to be reading from this bloody book all night, I grabbed three pages from it and ripped them out. As I did so, I punched him hard on the cheek with my fist. He fell backwards into the fire, picked himself up and came at me like a raging lion, throwing me a punch on the side of my head. I went out like a light.

‘When he saw how still I was lying he told me he became frightened and thought about running off somewhere; but I soon recovered consciousness and shouted at him: “Oh,

have you killed me, you bastard? Have you murdered me for my money? Before I die, I shall have a kiss from you!”

‘He came over and knelt beside me. “Dear Alison, my darling,” he said. “So God help me, I shall never do this to you ever again. It was your fault, but please forgive me.”

‘I raised myself up and hit him on the cheek as hard as I could! “Take that!” I cried. “It’s what you deserve, you bastard! And now I must die. I can’t speak any more.”

‘But at last, after some anguish, we kissed and made up. He gave me back all the land and possessions and the house that we shared, so they were mine once more. He also promised never again to hurt me, neither with his tongue nor with his fist. And I made him burn that bloody book.

‘When I’d received all the sovereignty in the house and he had sworn that: “I will let you do what you like from now on, my own dear wife, provided that you keep your honour and don’t damage my reputation,” then after that, we never had a cross word together. God help me, I was as kind to him as any wife, from Denmark to India. And I was also faithful, as he was to me.

‘I pray to God who sits in majesty to bless his dear soul, for mercy! Now I shall tell my tale, if you will listen.’

Biholde the words between the Somonour and the Frere

‘*Start* the tale? Madam, so may I have Bliss but was that just the preamble?’ laughed the friar.

‘Lo! By God’s two arms, can a friar never stop meddling?’ exclaimed the summoner. ‘Lo! Good men, what’s the difference between a fly and a friar? Answer: nothing, ‘cos they both get everywhere they shouldn’t, and you can’t get rid of them! He complains about preambles. What? A friar! Go and preamble somewhere else, or trot off, or sit down and shut up or something. You’re spoiling it all for the rest of us.’

‘Oh yes? Is that the way it is, then?’ replied the friar. ‘By my faith, before we reach Canterbury I shall tell such a merry tale or two about a summoner that I’ll have everybody falling off their horses, they’ll be laughing so much.’

‘You can go to hell!’ exclaimed the summoner. ‘And I’ll go to hell with you if I don’t tell two or three stories before we arrive at Sittingbourne about friars, ones that will make you want to fall off your horse and vanish into the ground for shame!’

‘PEACE!’ cried Harry Bailly. ‘Let this woman tell her tale. The two of you talk as though you’ve been drinking ale all day. Please, carry on with your story, madam.’

‘I’m ready to, sir,’ replied Alison. ‘Just as you wish, so long as this worthy friar doesn’t mind.’

‘Madam, speak on, and I will listen,’ said the friar.

Heer biginneth the Tale of the Wyf of Bathe

In th’olde dayes of the king Arthour, of which that Britons speken greet honour, al was this land fulfild of fayerye. The elf-queen, with hir joly companye, daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede; this was the olde opinion, as I rede – In the days of King Arthur, whose memory is held in such high esteem, Britain was filled with the magic of an Otherworld. The Queen of Elves, with her jolly company, could often be seen dancing in the meadows, or so people thought; I speak of many hundreds of years ago, for there are no elves to be found anywhere now. Friars and churchmen have seen to that, spreading across the land as thickly as flecks of dust in a sunbeam, blessing everything in sight – halls and chambers, kitchens, bedrooms, towns and cities, castles, towers, woods and streams, ships, even dairies – so that now the Otherworld has vanished away entirely. Where once there was an elf, now there is a friar, chanting his matins; ladies in orchards have only him to fear now!

It happened that King Arthur had in his household a young knight who, while he was riding one day beside a river, came upon a maiden who was walking all alone. Taking advantage of the situation, this young bachelor made love to the damsel against her will. The crime caused such an outcry among King Arthur’s retinue that the wretch was soon caught and sentenced to death, as the law required. But Queen Guinevere requested that he be handed over to her for punishment, and King Arthur gave her the knight, to do with as she wished. The queen thanked him.

‘But do not imagine that your life is now safe,’ she told her prisoner. ‘I grant it to you only if you can answer the following question: tell me what it is that we women most desire. Think carefully, or your neck bone will feel the cutting power of iron! And if you cannot give me an answer immediately, I give you leave to search for a year and a day, wherever you please, and to return at the appointed time with your reply.’

This young knight was distraught, but what other choice did he have? So he set off, agreeing to return within a year and a day with his answer. He went everywhere he could think of, asking for advice and trying to discover what women love the most; but he could find no two answers the same. Some told him that women love jewels and wealth, others that it is honour they prize most highly. Some said jollity was most important, others clothes, or a good lover, or a frequent change of partner. Some said flattery, and certainly this must rank high on the list, I should expect, for with the net of flattery, we women are all caught. Some advised him that we best like to be free and to do as we please, or not to have our shortcomings pointed out, but to be thought wise. For there is no woman who will not kick a man where it hurts for exposing her weaknesses; let a man try, and he will find the truth of this! However guilty we are, we like to be thought blameless. And some said that women like to be considered discrete, and steadfast. Ha! What a joke!

This knight, when he saw how hopeless things had become, began to get very depressed. The end of the year was approaching and it was time to return to King Arthur's court. So off he set, despondently. And as he rode through a forest, he came upon twenty-four ladies, or more, dancing in a circle. He rode towards the dancers eagerly, hoping to speak with them, but as he approached, they vanished, and in their place sat a filthy old crone. She arose and said: 'Sir knight, you have strayed from your path and have no business to be in this ancient place. What is it that you seek?'

'My dear lady,' said the knight, 'Unless I can discover what women most desire, I am a dead man. If you can tell me, I will reward you handsomely.'

'Give me your word, upon my hand, here, that you will do what I ask of you, if it lies in your power, and I will tell you what you wish to know.'

'I give you my word,' replied the knight.

'Then I guarantee that your life will be safe, for I pledge my own life that Queen Guinevere will say as I do. Let us see if anyone dares to refute what I shall teach you! Let us go at once.' Then she whispered something in his ear, and told him not to be fearful.

When they arrived at King Arthur's court, the knight announced that he had kept his pledge to return and to answer the question. All the women assembled, with Queen Guinevere sitting in judgement, to hear his answer. The knight was commanded to approach. The court fell silent, and he was formally required to tell the queen what women desire the most. This knight did not stand silently but answered at once, in a manly voice, so that all could hear: 'My liege lady,' he said, 'women desire to have power over the men in their lives; and though you may kill me, you may do as you please, for I am here at your command.'

Nobody in the court, neither widow, wife nor maiden, could find any reason to argue against this reply, and all said that the knight deserved to keep his life. At this, the old crone stood up and said: 'Mercy, my sovereign lady queen. Give me justice before the court departs. I instructed this knight to give the answer he did on the condition that he would do something for me, if it lay in his power. Before this court, therefore, I require, Sir knight, that you take me as your wife. For be in no doubt that I have saved your life. If you dispute this, then refuse me!'

'You speak the truth, alas!' he replied. 'But release me from this bond! Take all my wealth, but leave me my body!'

'No!' she cried. 'For though I am old, and filthy, and poor, not for all the gold and wealth that lies in the Earth shall I release you. You shall be my husband and my lover.'

'My lover?' said the knight. 'My damnation! Alas, that I should be so humiliated!'

But it was all to no avail, for the knight had to marry her, and take her to his bed. Now some will say that I am at fault for neglecting to describe the clothes and the jollity and the dishes served at their wedding. But I would reply that there is no joy at all to de-

scribe, only sorrow and lamentation, and there was no feasting. The couple were married privately the very next day, and the knight hid himself for shame.

His woes only increased when it was time to go to bed. He tossed and turned. His wife lay smiling and said: 'Does every knight behave as you do in bed? Is this King Arthur's rule? I have saved your life, so why do you act like this on our first night together? You are behaving like an imbecile. Tell me what is the matter, and I will remedy it, if I can.'



'Remedy it!' exclaimed the knight. 'How can you remedy it that you are so ugly, and old, and low-born. I wish I could die!'

'Is this the cause of your unrest?' she replied.

'Do you doubt it?'

'I could remedy it, if I chose to. You call me poor, and of low estate. But gentility comes not through birth but through one's own virtue. A lord's son may do shameful and villainous things. A man born into poverty may rise to great estate, as has been seen in

ancient Rome. And therefore, though my ancestors were lowborn, may God give me the grace to live virtuously. And as to poverty, our Lord Jesus Christ chose this way of life, for it holds no dishonour. He who is satisfied at his poverty, I hold him rich, though he lacks even a shirt. He who covets others' wealth is poor, for he cannot find contentment. But a poor man who desires nothing more is rich. Juvenal said that a poor man, when he travels, may sing and play before the thieves! Poverty is a bringer of wisdom, and through it a man may find not only himself and his true friends, but God. So do not reproach me for my poverty.

'And as to age, do you noblemen not teach that respect and honour should be shown to the elderly? You say that I am foul and old, so you need have no fear that I will dishonour you by being unfaithful. For filth and age are great keepers of chastity! But nonetheless, since I know your desires, I shall bring satisfaction to all your appetites.

'Choose now,' she said, 'one of these two alternatives. To have me foul and old until I die, and be a true wife to you, and never displease you, or else have me young and fair and take your chance that I may bring dishonour to your house and to your reputation. Choose whichever you like.

This knight pondered, and sighed, and at last said: 'My lady and my love, and wife so dear, I put myself in your wise governance. Choose yourself, whatever will be best for us both. I will do whatever you wish.'

'Then I am in charge,' she said, 'and may choose and dictate as I like?'

'Yes,' replied the knight. 'I think that that is best.'

‘Kiss me, then,’ she said. ‘And unless I am as attractive as the most beautiful lady in all this world, you can do what you like with me. Lift up the curtain, and look.’

And when the knight saw how beautiful she was, and how young, he took her up in his arms, his heart bathed in bliss, and kissed her a thousand times! And all that night she pandered to his every wish and desire. And thus they lived, for the rest of their lives, in perfect joy and happiness.