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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

THE PROLOGUE. <1>

Experience, though none authority* *authoritative texts
Were in this world, is right enough for me
To speak of woe that is in marriage:
For, lordings, since I twelve year was of age,
(Thanked be God that *is etern on live),* *lives eternally*
Husbands at the church door have I had five,<2>
For I so often have y-wedded be,
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But me was told, not longe time gone is
That sithen* Christe went never but ones *since
To wedding, in the Cane* of Galilee, *Cana
That by that ilk* example taught he me, *same
That I not wedded shoulde be but once.
Lo, hearken eke a sharp word for the nonce,* *occasion
Beside a welle Jesus, God and man,
Spake in reproof of the Samaritan:
"Thou hast y-had five husbandes," said he;
"And thilke* man, that now hath wedded thee, *that
Is not thine husband:" <3> thus said he certain;
What that he meant thereby, I cannot sayn.
But that I aske, why the fifthe man
Was not husband to the Samaritan?
How many might she have in marriage?
Yet heard I never tellen *in mine age* *in my life*
Upon this number definitioun.
Men may divine, and glosen* up and down; *comment
But well I wot, express without a lie,
God bade us for to wax and multiply;
That gentle text can I well understand.
Eke well I wot, he said, that mine husband
Should leave father and mother, and take to me;
But of no number mention made he,
Of bigamy or of octogamy;
Why then should men speak of it villainy?* *as if it were a disgrace
Lo here, the wise king Dan* Solomon, *Lord <4>
I trow that he had wives more than one;
As would to God it lawful were to me

To be refreshed half so oft as he!
What gift* of God had he for all his wives? *special favour, licence
No man hath such, that in this world alive is.
God wot, this noble king, *as to my wit,* *as I understand*
The first night had many a merry fit
With each of them, so *well was him on live.* *so well he lived*
Blessed be God that I have wedded five!
Welcome the sixth whenever that he shall.
For since I will not keep me chaste in all,
When mine husband is from the world y-gone,
Some Christian man shall wedde me anon.
For then th' apostle saith that I am free
To wed, *a' God's half,* where it liketh me. *on God's part*
He saith, that to be wedded is no sin;
Better is to be wedded than to brin.* *burn
What recketh* me though folk say villainy** *care **evil
Of shrewed* Lamech, and his bigamy? *impious, wicked
I wot well Abraham was a holy man,
And Jacob eke, as far as ev'r I can.* *know
And each of them had wives more than two;
And many another holy man also.
Where can ye see, *in any manner age,* *in any period*
That highe God defended* marriage *forbade <5>
By word express? I pray you tell it me;
Or where commanded he virginity?
I wot as well as you, it is no dread,* *doubt
Th' apostle, when he spake of maidenhead,
He said, that precept thereof had he none:
Men may counsel a woman to be one,* *a maid
But counseling is no commandement;
He put it in our owen judgement.
For, hadde God commanded maidenhead,
Then had he damned* wedding out of dread;** *condemned **doubt
And certes, if there were no seed y-sow,* *sown
Virginity then whereof should it grow?
Paul durste not commanden, at the least,
A thing of which his Master gave no hest.* *command
The dart* is set up for virginity; *goal <6>
Catch whoso may, who runneth best let see.
But this word is not ta'en of every wight,
But there as God will give it of his might. *except where*
I wot well that th' apostle was a maid,
But natheless, although he wrote and said,
He would that every wight were such as he,

All is but counsel to virginity.
And, since to be a wife he gave me leave
Of indulgence, so is it no repreve* *scandal, reproach
To wedde me, if that my make* should die, *mate, husband
Without exception* of bigamy; *charge, reproach
All were it good no woman for to touch *though it might be*
(He meant as in his bed or in his couch),
For peril is both fire and tow t'assemble
Ye know what this example may resemble.
This is all and some, he held virginity
More profit than wedding in frailty:
(*Frailty clepe I, but if* that he and she *frailty I call it,
Would lead their lives all in chastity), unless*
I grant it well, I have of none envy
Who maidenhead prefer to bigamy;
It liketh them t' be clean in body and ghost;* *soul
Of mine estate* I will not make a boast. *condition
For, well ye know, a lord in his household
Hath not every vessel all of gold; <7>
Some are of tree, and do their lord service.
God calleth folk to him in sundry wise,
And each one hath of God a proper gift,
Some this, some that, as liketh him to shift.* *appoint, distribute
Virginity is great perfection,
And continence eke with devotion:
But Christ, that of perfection is the well,* *fountain
Bade not every wight he should go sell
All that he had, and give it to the poor,
And in such wise follow him and his lore:* *doctrine
He spake to them that would live perfectly, —
And, lordings, by your leave, that am not I;
I will bestow the flower of mine age
In th' acts and in the fruits of marriage.
Tell me also, to what conclusion* *end, purpose
Were members made of generation,
And of so perfect wise a wight* y-wrought? *being
Trust me right well, they were not made for nought.
Glose whoso will, and say both up and down,
That they were made for the purgatioun
Of urine, and of other thinges smale,
And eke to know a female from a male:
And for none other cause? say ye no?
Experience wot well it is not so.
So that the clerkes* be not with me wroth, *scholars

I say this, that they were made for both,
That is to say, *for office, and for ease* *for duty and
Of engendrure, there we God not displease. for pleasure*
Why should men elles in their bookes set,
That man shall yield unto his wife her debt?
Now wherewith should he make his payement,
If he us'd not his silly instrument?
Then were they made upon a creature
To purge urine, and eke for engendrure.
But I say not that every wight is hold,* *obliged
That hath such harness* as I to you told, *equipment
To go and use them in engendrure;
Then should men take of chastity no cure.* *care
Christ was a maid, and shapen* as a man, *fashioned
And many a saint, since that this world began,
Yet ever liv'd in perfect chastity.
I will not vie* with no virginity. *contend
Let them with bread of pured* wheat be fed, *purified
And let us wives eat our barley bread.
And yet with barley bread, Mark tell us can,<8>
Our Lord Jesus refreshed many a man.
In such estate as God hath *cleped us,* *called us to
I'll persevere, I am not precious,* *over-dainty
In wifehood I will use mine instrument
As freely as my Maker hath it sent.
If I be dangerous* God give me sorrow; *sparing of my favours
Mine husband shall it have, both eve and morrow,
When that him list come forth and pay his debt.
A husband will I have, I *will no let,* *will bear no hindrance*
Which shall be both my debtor and my thrall,* *slave
And have his tribulation withal
Upon his flesh, while that I am his wife.
I have the power during all my life
Upon his proper body, and not he;
Right thus th' apostle told it unto me,
And bade our husbands for to love us well;
All this sentence me liketh every deal.* *whit
Up start the Pardoner, and that anon;
"Now, Dame," quoth he, "by God and by Saint John,
Ye are a noble preacher in this case.
I was about to wed a wife, alas!
What? should I bie* it on my flesh so dear? *suffer for
Yet had I lever* wed no wife this year." *rather
"Abide,"* quoth she; "my tale is not begun *wait in patience

Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tun
Ere that I go, shall savour worse than ale.
And when that I have told thee forth my tale
Of tribulation in marriage,
Of which I am expert in all mine age,
(This is to say, myself hath been the whip),
Then mayest thou choose whether thou wilt sip
Of *thilke tunne,* that I now shall broach. *that tun*
Beware of it, ere thou too nigh approach,
For I shall tell examples more than ten:
Whoso will not beware by other men,
By him shall other men corrected be:
These same wordes writeth Ptolemy;
Read in his Almagest, and take it there."
"Dame, I would pray you, if your will it were,"
Saide this Pardoner, "as ye began,
Tell forth your tale, and spare for no man,
And teach us younge men of your practique."
"Gladly," quoth she, "since that it may you like.
But that I pray to all this company,
If that I speak after my fantasy,
To take nought agrief* what I may say; *to heart
For mine intent is only for to play.
Now, Sirs, then will I tell you forth my tale.
As ever may I drinke wine or ale
I shall say sooth; the husbands that I had
Three of them were good, and two were bad
The three were goode men, and rich, and old
Unnethes mighte they the statute hold *they could with difficulty
In which that they were bounden unto me. obey the law*
Yet wot well what I mean of this, pardie.* *by God
As God me help, I laugh when that I think
How piteously at night I made them swink,* *labour
But, *by my fay, I told of it no store:* *by my faith, I held it
They had me giv'n their land and their treasor, of no account*
Me needed not do longer diligence
To win their love, or do them reverence.
They loved me so well, by God above,
That I *tolde no dainty* of their love. *cared nothing for*
A wise woman will busy her ever-in-one* *constantly
To get their love, where that she hath none.
But, since I had them wholly in my hand,
And that they had me given all their land,
Why should I take keep* them for to please, *care

But* it were for my profit, or mine ease? *unless
I set them so a-worke, by my fay,
That many a night they sange, well-away!
The bacon was not fetched for them, I trow,
That some men have in Essex at Dunmow.<9>
I govern'd them so well after my law,
That each of them full blissful was and fawe* *fain
To bringe me gay thinges from the fair.
They were full glad when that I spake them fair,
For, God it wot, I *chid them spiteously.* *rebuked them angrily*
Now hearken how I bare me properly.
Ye wise wives, that can understand,
Thus should ye speak, and *bear them wrong on hand,* *make them
For half so boldely can there no man believe falsely*
Swearen and lien as a woman can.
(I say not this by wives that be wise,
But if it be when they them misadvise.)* *unless* *act unadvisedly
A wise wife, if that she can* her good, *knows
Shall *beare them on hand* the cow is wood, *make them believe*
And take witness of her owen maid
Of their assent: but hearken how I said.
"Sir olde kaynard,<10> is this thine array?
Why is my neighebouré's wife so gay?
She is honour'd *over all where* she go'th, *wheresoever
I sit at home, I have no *thrifty cloth.* *good clothes*
What dost thou at my neighebouré's house?
Is she so fair? art thou so amorous?
What rown'st* thou with our maid? benedicite, *whisperest
Sir olde lechour, let thy japes* be. *tricks
And if I have a gossip, or a friend
(Withoute guilt), thou chidest as a fiend,
If that I walk or play unto his house.
Thou comest home as drunken as a mouse,
And preachest on thy bench, with evil prefe:* *proof
Thou say'st to me, it is a great mischief
To wed a poore woman, for costage:* *expense
And if that she be rich, of high parage;* * birth <11>
Then say'st thou, that it is a tormentry
To suffer her pride and melancholy.
And if that she be fair, thou very knave,
Thou say'st that every holour* will her have; *whoremonger
She may no while in chastity abide,
That is assailed upon every side.
Thou say'st some folk desire us for richess,

Some for our shape, and some for our fairness,
And some, for she can either sing or dance,
And some for gentiless and dalliance,
Some for her handes and her armes smale:
Thus goes all to the devil, by thy tale;
Thou say'st, men may not keep a castle wall
That may be so assailed *over all.* *everywhere*
And if that she be foul, thou say'st that she
Coveteth every man that she may see;
For as a spaniel she will on him leap,
Till she may finde some man her to cheap;* *buy
And none so grey goose goes there in the lake,
(So say'st thou) that will be without a make.* *mate
And say'st, it is a hard thing for to weld *wield, govern
A thing that no man will, *his thankes, held.* *hold with his goodwill*
Thus say'st thou, lorel,* when thou go'st to bed, *good-for-nothing
And that no wise man needeth for to wed,
Nor no man that intendeth unto heaven.
With wilde thunder dint* and fiery leven** * stroke **lightning
Mote* thy wicked necke be to-broke. *may
Thou say'st, that dropping houses, and eke smoke,
And chiding wives, make men to flee
Out of their owne house; ah! ben'dicite,
What aileth such an old man for to chide?
Thou say'st, we wives will our vices hide,
Till we be fast,* and then we will them shew. *wedded
Well may that be a proverb of a shrew.* *ill-tempered wretch
Thou say'st, that oxen, asses, horses, hounds,
They be *assayed at diverse stounds,* *tested at various
Basons and lavers, ere that men them buy, seasons
Spoones, stooles, and all such husbandry,
And so be pots, and clothes, and array,* *raiment
But folk of wives make none assay,
Till they be wedded, — olde dotard shrew! —
And then, say'st thou, we will our vices shew.
Thou say'st also, that it displeaseth me,
But if * that thou wilt praise my beauty, *unless
And but* thou pore alway upon my face, *unless
And call me faire dame in every place;
And but* thou make a feast on thilke** day *unless **that
That I was born, and make me fresh and gay;
And but thou do to my norice* honour, *nurse <12>
And to my chamberere* within my bow'r, *chamber-maid
And to my father's folk, and mine allies;* *relations

Thus sayest thou, old barrel full of lies.
And yet also of our prentice Jenkin,
For his crisp hair, shining as gold so fine,
And for he squireth me both up and down,
Yet hast thou caught a false suspicioun:
I will him not, though thou wert dead to-morrow.
But tell me this, why hidest thou, *with sorrow,* *sorrow on thee!*
The keyes of thy chest away from me?
It is my good* as well as thine, pardie. *property
What, think'st to make an idiot of our dame?
Now, by that lord that called is Saint Jame,
Thou shalt not both, although that thou wert wood,* *furious
Be master of my body, and my good,* *property
The one thou shalt forego, maugre* thine eyen. *in spite of
What helpeth it of me t'inquire and spyen?
I trow thou wouldest lock me in thy chest.
Thou shouldest say, 'Fair wife, go where thee lest;
Take your disport; I will believe no tales;
I know you for a true wife, Dame Ales.'* *Alice
We love no man, that taketh keep* or charge *care
Where that we go; we will be at our large.
Of alle men most blessed may he be,
The wise astrologer Dan* Ptolemy, *Lord
That saith this proverb in his Almagest:<13>
'Of alle men his wisdom is highest,
That recketh not who hath the world in hand.
By this proverb thou shalt well understand,
Have thou enough, what thar* thee reck or care *needs, behoves
How merrily that other folkes fare?
For certes, olde dotard, by your leave,
Ye shall have [pleasure] <14> right enough at eve.
He is too great a niggard that will werne* *forbid
A man to light a candle at his lantern;
He shall have never the less light, pardie.
Have thou enough, thee thar* not plaine** thee *need **complain
Thou say'st also, if that we make us gay
With clothing and with precious array,
That it is peril of our chastity.
And yet, — with sorrow! — thou enforcest thee,
And say'st these words in the apostle's name:
'In habit made with chastity and shame* *modesty
Ye women shall apparel you,' quoth he,<15>
'And not in tressed hair and gay perrie,* *jewels
As pearles, nor with gold, nor clothes rich.'

After thy text nor after thy rubrich
I will not work as muchel as a gnat.
Thou say'st also, I walk out like a cat;
For whoso woulde singe the catte's skin
Then will the catte well dwell in her inn;* *house
And if the catte's skin be sleek and gay,
She will not dwell in house half a day,
But forth she will, ere any day be daw'd,
To shew her skin, and go a caterwaw'd.* *caterwauling
This is to say, if I be gay, sir shrew,
I will run out, my borel* for to shew. *apparel, fine clothes
Sir olde fool, what helpeth thee to spyen?
Though thou pray Argus with his hundred eyen
To be my wardecorps,* as he can best *body-guard
In faith he shall not keep me, *but me lest:* *unless I please*
Yet could I *make his beard,* so may I the. *make a jest of him*
"Thou sayest eke, that there be thinges three, *thrive
Which thinges greatly trouble all this earth,
And that no wighte may endure the ferth:* *fourth
O lefe* sir shrew, may Jesus short** thy life. *pleasant **shorten
Yet preachest thou, and say'st, a hateful wife
Y-reckon'd is for one of these mischances.
Be there *none other manner resemblances* *no other kind of
That ye may liken your parables unto, comparison*
But if a silly wife be one of tho?* *those
Thou likenest a woman's love to hell;
To barren land where water may not dwell.
Thou likenest it also to wild fire;
The more it burns, the more it hath desire
To consume every thing that burnt will be.
Thou sayest, right as wormes shend* a tree, *destroy
Right so a wife destroyeth her husbond;
This know they well that be to wives bond."
Lordings, right thus, as ye have understand,
Bare I stiffly mine old husbands on hand, *made them believe*
That thus they saiden in their drunkenness;
And all was false, but that I took witness
On Jenkin, and upon my niece also.
O Lord! the pain I did them, and the woe,
'Full guilteless, by Godde's sweete pine;* *pain
For as a horse I coulde bite and whine;
I coulde plain,* an'** I was in the guilt, *complain **even though
Or elles oftentime I had been spilt* *ruined
Whoso first cometh to the nilll, first grint;* *is ground

I plained first, so was our war y-stint.* *stopped
They were full glad to excuse them full blive* *quickly
Of things that they never *aguilt their live.* *were guilty in their lives*
Of wenches would I *beare them on hand,* *falsely accuse them*
When that for sickness scarcely might they stand,
Yet tickled I his hearte for that he
Ween'd* that I had of him so great cherte:** *though **affection<16>
I swore that all my walking out by night
Was for to espy wenches that he dight:* *adorned
Under that colour had I many a mirth.
For all such wit is given us at birth;
Deceit, weeping, and spinning, God doth give
To women kindly, while that they may live. *naturally
And thus of one thing I may vaunte me,
At th' end I had the better in each degree,
By sleight, or force, or by some manner thing,
As by continual murmur or grudging,* *complaining
Namely* a-bed, there hadde they mischance, *especially
There would I chide, and do them no pleasance:
I would no longer in the bed abide,
If that I felt his arm over my side,
Till he had made his ransom unto me,
Then would I suffer him do his nicety.* *folly <17>
And therefore every man this tale I tell,
Win whoso may, for all is for to sell;
With empty hand men may no hawkes lure;
For winning would I all his will endure,
And make me a feigned appetite,
And yet in bacon* had I never delight: *i.e. of Dunmow <9>
That made me that I ever would them chide.
For, though the Pope had sitten them beside,
I would not spare them at their owen board,
For, by my troth, I quit* them word for word *repaid
As help me very God omnipotent,
Though I right now should make my testament
I owe them not a word, that is not quit* *repaid
I brought it so aboute by my wit,
That they must give it up, as for the best
Or elles had we never been in rest.
For, though he looked as a wood* lion, *furious
Yet should he fail of his conclusion.
Then would I say, "Now, goode lefe* tak keep** *dear **heed
How meekly looketh Wilken oure sheep!

Come near, my spouse, and let me ba* thy cheek *kiss <18>
Ye shoulde be all patient and meek,
And have a *sweet y-spiced* conscience, *tender, nice*
Since ye so preach of Jobe's patience.
Suffer alway, since ye so well can preach,
And but* ye do, certain we shall you teach* *unless
That it is fair to have a wife in peace.
One of us two must bowe* doubteless: *give way
And since a man is more reasonable
Than woman is, ye must be suff'rable.
What aileth you to grudge* thus and groan? *complain
Is it for ye would have my [love] <14> alone?
Why, take it all: lo, have it every deal,* *whit
Peter! <19> shrew* you but ye love it well *curse
For if I woulde sell my *belle chose*, *beautiful thing*
I coulde walk as fresh as is a rose,
But I will keep it for your owen tooth.
Ye be to blame, by God, I say you sooth."
Such manner wordes hadde we on hand.
Now will I speaken of my fourth husband.
My fourthe husband was a revellour;
This is to say, he had a paramour,
And I was young and full of ragerie,* *wantonness
Stubborn and strong, and jolly as a pie.* *magpie
Then could I dance to a harpe smale,
And sing, y-wis,* as any nightingale, *certainly
When I had drunk a draught of sweete wine.
Metellius, the foule churl, the swine,
That with a staff bereft his wife of life
For she drank wine, though I had been his wife,
Never should he have daunted me from drink:
And, after wine, of Venus most I think.
For all so sure as cold engenders hail,
A liquorish mouth must have a liquorish tail.
In woman vinolent* is no defence,** *full of wine *resistance
This knowe lechours by experience.
But, lord Christ, when that it rememb'reth me
Upon my youth, and on my jollity,
It tickleth me about mine hearte-root;
Unto this day it doth mine hearte boot,* *good
That I have had my world as in my time.
But age, alas! that all will envenime,* *poison, embitter
Hath me bereft my beauty and my pith:* *vigour
Let go; farewell; the devil go therewith.

The flour is gon, there is no more to tell,
The bran, as I best may, now must I sell.
But yet to be right merry will I fand.* *try
Now forth to tell you of my fourth husband,
I say, I in my heart had great despite,
That he of any other had delight;
But he was quit,* by God and by Saint Joce:<21> *requited, paid back
I made for him of the same wood a cross;
Not of my body in no foul mannere,
But certainly I made folk such cheer,
That in his owen grease I made him fry
For anger, and for very jealousy.
By God, in earth I was his purgatory,
For which I hope his soul may be in glory.
For, God it wot, he sat full oft and sung,
When that his shoe full bitterly him wrung.* *pinched
There was no wight, save God and he, that wist
In many wise how sore I did him twist.<20>
He died when I came from Jerusalem,
And lies in grave under the *roode beam:* *cross*
Although his tomb is not so curious
As was the sepulchre of Darius,
Which that Apelles wrought so subtlely.
It is but waste to bury them preciously.
Let him fare well, God give his soule rest,
He is now in his grave and in his chest.
Now of my fifthe husband will I tell:
God let his soul never come into hell.
And yet was he to me the moste shrew;* *cruel, ill-tempered
That feel I on my ribbes all *by rew,* *in a row
And ever shall, until mine ending day.
But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
And therewithal so well he could me glose,* *flatter
When that he woulde have my belle chose,
Though he had beaten me on every bone,
Yet could he win again my love anon.
I trow, I lov'd him better, for that he
Was of his love so dangerous* to me. *sparing, difficult
We women have, if that I shall not lie,
In this matter a quainte fantasy.
Whatever thing we may not lightly have,
Thereafter will we cry all day and crave.
Forbid us thing, and that desire we;
Press on us fast, and thenne will we flee.

With danger* utter we all our chaffare;** *difficulty **merchandise
Great press at market maketh deare ware,
And too great cheap is held at little price;
This knoweth every woman that is wise.
My fifthe husband, God his soule bless,
Which that I took for love and no richess,
He some time was *a clerk of Oxenford,* *a scholar of Oxford*
And had left school, and went at home to board
With my gossip,* dwelling in oure town: *godmother
God have her soul, her name was Alisoun.
She knew my heart, and all my privity,
Bet than our parish priest, so may I the.* *thrive
To her betrayed I my counsel all;
For had my husband pissed on a wall,
Or done a thing that should have cost his life,
To her, and to another worthy wife,
And to my niece, which that I loved well,
I would have told his counsel every deal.* *jot
And so I did full often, God it wot,
That made his face full often red and hot
For very shame, and blam'd himself, for he
Had told to me so great a privity.* *secret
And so befell that ones in a Lent
(So oftentimes I to my gossip went,
For ever yet I loved to be gay,
And for to walk in March, April, and May
From house to house, to heare sundry tales),
That Jenkin clerk, and my gossip, Dame Ales,
And I myself, into the fieldes went.
Mine husband was at London all that Lent;
I had the better leisure for to play,
And for to see, and eke for to be sey* *seen
Of lusty folk; what wist I where my grace* *favour
Was shapen for to be, or in what place? *appointed
Therefore made I my visitations
To vigilies,* and to processions, *festival-eves<22>
To preachings eke, and to these pilgrimages,
To plays of miracles, and marriages,
And weared upon me gay scarlet gites.* *gowns
These wormes, nor these mothes, nor these mites
On my apparel frett* them never a deal** *fed **whit
And know'st thou why? for they were used* well. *worn
Now will I telle forth what happen'd me:
I say, that in the fieldes walked we,

Till truely we had such dalliance,
This clerk and I, that of my purveyance* *foresight
I spake to him, and told him how that he,
If I were widow, shoulde wedde me.
For certainly, I say for no bobance,* *boasting<23>
Yet was I never without purveyance* *foresight
Of marriage, nor of other thinges eke:
I hold a mouse's wit not worth a leek,
That hath but one hole for to starte* to,<24> *escape
And if that faile, then is all y-do.* *done
[*I bare him on hand* he had enchanted me *falsely assured him*
(My dame taughte me that subtilty);
And eke I said, I mette* of him all night, *dreamed
He would have slain me, as I lay upright,
And all my bed was full of very blood;
But yet I hop'd that he should do me good;
For blood betoken'd gold, as me was taught.
And all was false, I dream'd of him right naught,
But as I follow'd aye my dame's lore,
As well of that as of other things more.] <25>
But now, sir, let me see, what shall I sayn?
Aha! by God, I have my tale again.
When that my fourthe husband was on bier,
I wept algate* and made a sorry cheer,** *always **countenance
As wives must, for it is the usage;
And with my kerchief covered my visage;
But, for I was provided with a make,* *mate
I wept but little, that I undertake* *promise
To churche was mine husband borne a-morrow
With neighebours that for him made sorrow,
And Jenkin, oure clerk, was one of tho:* *those
As help me God, when that I saw him go
After the bier, methought he had a pair
Of legges and of feet so clean and fair,
That all my heart I gave unto his hold.* *keeping
He was, I trow, a twenty winter old,
And I was forty, if I shall say sooth,
But yet I had always a colte's tooth.
Gat-toothed* I was, and that became me well, *see note <26>
I had the print of Sainte Venus' seal.
[As help me God, I was a lusty one,
And fair, and rich, and young, and *well begone:* *in a good way*
For certes I am all venerian* *under the influence of Venus
In feeling, and my heart is martian;* *under the influence of Mars

Venus me gave my lust and liquorishness,
And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.] <25>
Mine ascendant was Taure,* and Mars therein: *Taurus
Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
I follow'd aye mine inclination
By virtue of my constellation:
That made me that I coulde not withdraw
My chamber of Venus from a good fellaw.
[Yet have I Marte's mark upon my face,
And also in another privy place.
For God so wisly* be my salvation, *certainly
I loved never by discretion,
But ever follow'd mine own appetite,
All* were he short, or long, or black, or white, *whether
I took no keep,* so that he liked me, *heed
How poor he was, neither of what degree.] <25>
What should I say? but that at the month's end
This jolly clerk Jenkin, that was so hend,* *courteous
Had wedded me with great solemnity,
And to him gave I all the land and fee
That ever was me given therebefore:
But afterward repented me full sore.
He woulde suffer nothing of my list.* *pleasure
By God, he smote me ones with his fist,
For that I rent out of his book a leaf,
That of the stroke mine eare wax'd all deaf.
Stubborn I was, as is a lioness,
And of my tongue a very jangleress,* *prater
And walk I would, as I had done beforn,
From house to house, although he had it sworn:* *had sworn to
For which he oftentimes woulde preach prevent it
And me of olde Roman gestes* teach *stories
How that Sulpitius Gallus left his wife
And her forsook for term of all his
For nought but open-headed* he her say** *bare-headed **saw
Looking out at his door upon a day.
Another Roman <27> told he me by name,
That, for his wife was at a summer game
Without his knowing, he forsook her eke.
And then would he upon his Bible seek
That ilke* proverb of Ecclesiast, *same
Where he commandeth, and forbiddeth fast,
Man shall not suffer his wife go roll about.
Then would he say right thus withoute doubt:

"Whoso that buildeth his house all of sallows,* *willows
And pricketh his blind horse over the fallows,
And suff'reth his wife to *go seeke hallows,* *make pilgrimages*
Is worthy to be hanged on the gallows."
But all for nought; I *sette not a haw* *cared nothing for*
Of his proverbs, nor of his olde saw;
Nor would I not of him corrected be.
I hate them that my vices telle me,
And so do more of us (God wot) than I.
This made him wood* with me all utterly; *furious
I woulde not forbear* him in no case. *endure
Now will I say you sooth, by Saint Thomas,
Why that I rent out of his book a leaf,
For which he smote me, so that I was deaf.
He had a book, that gladly night and day
For his disport he would it read alway;
He call'd it Valerie,<28> and Theophrast,
And with that book he laugh'd alway full fast.
And eke there was a clerk sometime at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Saint Jerome,
That made a book against Jovinian,
Which book was there; and eke Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise,
That was an abbess not far from Paris;
And eke the Parables* of Solomon, *Proverbs
Ovide's Art, <29> and bourdes* many one; *jests
And alle these were bound in one volume.
And every night and day was his custume
(When he had leisure and vacation
From other worldly occupation)
To readen in this book of wicked wives.
He knew of them more legends and more lives
Than be of goodde wives in the Bible.
For, trust me well, it is an impossible
That any clerk will speake good of wives,
(*But if* it be of holy saintes' lives) *unless
Nor of none other woman never the mo'.
Who painted the lion, tell it me, who?
By God, if women haddde written stories,
As clerkes have within their oratories,
They would have writ of men more wickedness
Than all the mark of Adam <30> may redress
The children of Mercury and of Venus,<31>
Be in their working full contrarious.

Mercury loveth wisdom and science,
And Venus loveth riot and dispence.* *extravagance
And for their diverse disposition,
Each falls in other's exaltation.
As thus, God wot, Mercury is desolate
In Pisces, where Venus is exaltate,
And Venus falls where Mercury is raised. <32>
Therefore no woman by no clerk is praised.
The clerk, when he is old, and may not do
Of Venus' works not worth his olde shoe,
Then sits he down, and writes in his dotage,
That women cannot keep their marriage.
But now to purpose, why I tolde thee
That I was beaten for a book, pardie.
Upon a night Jenkin, that was our sire,* *goodman
Read on his book, as he sat by the fire,
Of Eva first, that for her wickedness
Was all mankind brought into wretchedness,
For which that Jesus Christ himself was slain,
That bought us with his hearte-blood again.
Lo here express of women may ye find
That woman was the loss of all mankind.
Then read he me how Samson lost his hairs
Sleeping, his leman cut them with her shears,
Through whiche treason lost he both his eyen.
Then read he me, if that I shall not lien,
Of Hercules, and of his Dejanire,
That caused him to set himself on fire.
Nothing forgot he of the care and woe
That Socrates had with his wives two;
How Xantippe cast piss upon his head.
This silly man sat still, as he were dead,
He wip'd his head, and no more durst he sayn,
But, "Ere the thunder stint* there cometh rain." *ceases
Of Phasiphae, that was queen of Crete,
For shrewedness* he thought the tale sweet. *wickedness
Fy, speak no more, it is a grisly thing,
Of her horrible lust and her liking.
Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery
That falsely made her husband for to die,
He read it with full good devotion.
He told me eke, for what occasion
Amphiorax at Thebes lost his life:
My husband had a legend of his wife

Eryphile, that for an ouche* of gold *clasp, collar
Had privily unto the Greekes told,
Where that her husband hid him in a place,
For which he had at Thebes sorry grace.
Of Luna told he me, and of Lucie;
They bothe made their husbands for to die,
That one for love, that other was for hate.
Luna her husband on an ev'ning late
Empoison'd had, for that she was his foe:
Lucia liquorish lov'd her husband so,
That, for he should always upon her think,
She gave him such a manner* love-drink, *sort of
That he was dead before it were the morrow:
And thus algates* husbands hadde sorrow. *always
Then told he me how one Latumeus
Complained to his fellow Arius
That in his garden growed such a tree,
On which he said how that his wives three
Hanged themselves for heart dispiteous.
"O leve* brother," quoth this Arius, *dear
"Give me a plant of thilke* blessed tree, *that
And in my garden planted shall it be."
Of later date of wives hath he read,
That some have slain their husbands in their bed,
And let their *lechour dight them* all the night, *lover ride them*
While that the corpse lay on the floor upright:
And some have driven nails into their brain,
While that they slept, and thus they have them slain:
Some have them given poison in their drink:
He spake more harm than hearte may bethink.
And therewithal he knew of more proverbs,
Than in this world there groweth grass or herbs.
"Better (quoth he) thine habitation
Be with a lion, or a foul dragon,
Than with a woman using for to chide.
Better (quoth he) high in the roof abide,
Than with an angry woman in the house,
They be so wicked and contrarious:
They hate that their husbands loven aye."
He said, "A woman cast her shame away
When she cast off her smock;" and farthermo',
"A fair woman, but* she be chaste also, *except
Is like a gold ring in a sowe's nose.
Who coulde ween,* or who coulde suppose *think

The woe that in mine heart was, and the pine?* *pain
And when I saw that he would never fine* *finish
To readen on this cursed book all night,
All suddenly three leaves have I plight* *plucked
Out of his book, right as he read, and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheek,
That in our fire he backward fell adown.
And he up start, as doth a wood* lion, *furious
And with his fist he smote me on the head,
That on the floor I lay as I were dead.
And when he saw how still that there I lay,
He was aghast, and would have fled away,
Till at the last out of my swoon I braid,* *woke
"Oh, hast thou slain me, thou false thief?" I said
"And for my land thus hast thou murder'd me?
Ere I be dead, yet will I kisse thee."
And near he came, and kneeled fair adown,
And saide", "Deare sister Alisoun,
As help me God, I shall thee never smite:
That I have done it is thyself to wite,* *blame
Forgive it me, and that I thee beseek."* *beseech
And yet eftsoons* I hit him on the cheek, *immediately; again
And saidde, "Thief, thus much am I awreak.* *avenged
Now will I die, I may no longer speak."
But at the last, with muche care and woe
We fell accorded* by ourselves two: *agreed
He gave me all the bridle in mine hand
To have the governance of house and land,
And of his tongue, and of his hand also.
I made him burn his book anon right tho.* *then
And when that I had gotten unto me
By mast'ry all the sovereignety,
And that he said, "Mine owen true wife,
Do *as thee list,* the term of all thy life, *as pleases thee*
Keep thine honour, and eke keep mine estate;
After that day we never had debate.
God help me so, 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 that sits in majesty
So bless his soule, for his mercy dear.
Now will I say my tale, if ye will hear. —
The Friar laugh'd when he had heard all this:
"Now, Dame," quoth he, "so have I joy and bliss,

This is a long preamble of a tale."
And when the Sompnour heard the Friar gale,* *speak
"Lo," quoth this Sompnour, "Godde's armes two,
A friar will intermete* him evermo': *interpose <33>
Lo, goode men, a fly and eke a frere
Will fall in ev'ry dish and eke mattere.
What speak'st thou of perambulation?* *preamble
What? amble or trot; or peace, or go sit down:
Thou lettest* our disport in this mattere." *hinderesst
"Yea, wilt thou so, Sir Sompnour?" quoth the Frere;
"Now by my faith I shall, ere that I go,
Tell of a Sompnour such a tale or two,
That all the folk shall laughen in this place."
"Now do, else, Friar, I beshrew* thy face," *curse
Quoth this Sompnour; "and I beshrewe me,
But if* I telle tales two or three *unless
Of friars, ere I come to Sittingbourne,
That I shall make thine hearte for to mourn:
For well I wot thy patience is gone."
Our Hoste cried, "Peace, and that anon;"
And saide, "Let the woman tell her tale.
Ye fare* as folk that drunken be of ale. *behave
Do, Dame, tell forth your tale, and that is best."
"All ready, sir," quoth she, "right as you lest,* *please
If I have licence of this worthy Frere."
"Yes, Dame," quoth he, "tell forth, and I will hear."

Notes to the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale

1. Among the evidences that Chaucer's great work was left incomplete, is the absence of any link of connexion between the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, and what goes before. This deficiency has in some editions caused the Squire's and the Merchant's Tales to be interposed between those of the Man of Law and the Wife of Bath; but in the Merchant's Tale there is internal proof that it was told after the jolly Dame's. Several manuscripts contain verses designed to serve as a connexion; but they are evidently not Chaucer's, and it is unnecessary to give them here. Of this Prologue, which may fairly be regarded as a distinct autobiographical tale, Tyrwhitt says: "The extraordinary length of it, as well as the vein of pleasantry that runs through it, is very suitable to the character of the speaker. The greatest part must have been of Chaucer's own invention, though one may plainly see that he had been reading the popular invectives against marriage and women in general; such as the 'Roman de la Rose,' 'Valerius ad Rufinum, De non Ducenda Uxore,' ('Valerius to Rufinus, on not being ruled by one's wife') and particularly 'Hieronymus contra Jovinianum.' ('Jerome against Jovinianus') St Jerome, among other things designed to discourage marriage, has inserted in his treatise a long passage from 'Liber Aureolus Theophrasti de Nuptiis.' ('Theophrastus's Golden Book of Marriage')."

2. A great part of the marriage service used to be performed in the church-porch.
3. Jesus and the Samaritan woman: John iv. 13.
4. Dan: Lord; Latin, "dominus." Another reading is "the wise man, King Solomon."
5. Defended: forbade; French, "defendre," to prohibit.
6. Dart: the goal; a spear or dart was set up to mark the point of victory.
7. "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour." — 2 Tim. ii 20.
8. Jesus feeding the multitude with barley bread: Mark vi. 41, 42.
9. At Dunmow prevailed the custom of giving, amid much merry making, a flitch of bacon to the married pair who had lived together for a year without quarrel or regret. The same custom prevailed of old in Bretagne.
10. "Cagnard," or "Caignard," a French term of reproach, originally derived from "canis," a dog.
11. Parage: birth, kindred; from Latin, "pario," I beget.
12. Norice: nurse; French, "nourrice."
13. This and the previous quotation from Ptolemy are due to the Dame's own fancy.
14. (Transcriber's note: Some Victorian censorship here. The word given in [brackets] should be "queint" i.e. "cunt".)
15. Women should not adorn themselves: see I Tim. ii. 9.
16. Cherte: affection; from French, "cher," dear.
17. Nicety: folly; French, "niaiserie."
18. Ba: kiss; from French, "baiser."
19. Peter!: by Saint Peter! a common adjuration, like Marie! from the Virgin's name.
20. St. Joce: or Judocus, a saint of Ponthieu, in France.
21. "An allusion," says Mr Wright, "to the story of the Roman sage who, when blamed for divorcing his wife, said that a shoe might appear outwardly to fit well, but no one but the wearer knew where it pinched."
22. Vigilies: festival-eves; see note 33 to the Prologue to the Tales.
23. Bobance: boasting; Ben Jonson's braggart, in "Every Man in his Humour," is named Bobadil.
24. "I hold a mouse's wit not worth a leek,
That hath but one hole for to starte to"
A very old proverb in French, German, and Latin.
25. The lines in brackets are only in some of the manuscripts.
26. Gat-toothed: gap-toothed; goat-toothed; or cat- or separate toothed. See note 41 to the prologue to the Tales.
27. Sempronius Sophus, of whom Valerius Maximus tells in his sixth book.
28. The tract of Walter Mapes against marriage, published under the title of "Epistola Valerii ad Rufinum."
29. "Ars Amoris."
30. All the mark of Adam: all who bear the mark of Adam i.e. all men.
31. The Children of Mercury and Venus: those born under the influence of the respective planets.
32. A planet, according to the old astrologers, was in "exaltation" when in the sign of

the Zodiac in which it exerted its strongest influence; the opposite sign, in which it was weakest, was called its "dejection." Venus being strongest in Pisces, was weakest in Virgo; but in Virgo Mercury was in "exaltation."
33. Intermete: interpose; French, "entremettre."

THE TALE. <1>

In olde dayes of the king Arthour,
Of which that Britons speake great honour,
All was this land full fill'd of faerie;* *fairies
The Elf-queen, with her jolly company,
Danced full oft in many a green mead
This was the old opinion, as I read;
I speak of many hundred years ago;
But now can no man see none elves mo',
For now the great charity and prayeres
Of limitours,* and other holy freres, *begging friars <2>
That search every land and ev'ry stream
As thick as motes in the sunne-beam,
Blessing halls, chambers, kitchenes, and bowers,
Cities and burghes, castles high and towers,
Thorpes* and barnes, shepens** and dairies, *villages <3> **stables
This makes that there be now no faeries:
For *there as* wont to walke was an elf, *where*
There walketh now the limitour himself,
In undermeles* and in morrowings**, *evenings <4> **mornings
And saith his matins and his holy things,
As he goes in his limitatioun.* *begging district
Women may now go safely up and down,
In every bush, and under every tree;
There is none other incubus <5> but he;
And he will do to them no dishonour.
And so befell it, that this king Arthour
Had in his house a lusty bacheler,
That on a day came riding from river: <6>
And happen'd, that, alone as she was born,
He saw a maiden walking him beforn,
Of which maiden anon, maugre* her head, *in spite of
By very force he reft her maidenhead:
For which oppression was such clamour,
And such pursuit unto the king Arthour,
That damned* was this knight for to be dead *condemned
By course of law, and should have lost his head;
(Paraventure such was the statute tho),* *then
But that the queen and other ladies mo'
So long they prayed the king of his grace,

Till he his life him granted in the place,
And gave him to the queen, all at her will
To choose whether she would him save or spill* *destroy
The queen thanked the king with all her might;
And, after this, thus spake she to the knight,
When that she saw her time upon a day.
"Thou standest yet," quoth she, "in such array,* *a position
That of thy life yet hast thou no surety;
I grant thee life, if thou canst tell to me
What thing is it that women most desiren:
Beware, and keep thy neck-bone from the iron* *executioner's axe
And if thou canst not tell it me anon,
Yet will I give thee leave for to gon
A twelvemonth and a day, to seek and lear* *learn
An answer suffisant* in this mattere. *satisfactory
And surety will I have, ere that thou pace,* *go
Thy body for to yielden in this place."
Woe was the knight, and sorrowfully siked;* *sighed
But what? he might not do all as him liked.
And at the last he chose him for to wend,* *depart
And come again, right at the yeare's end,
With such answer as God would him purvey:* *provide
And took his leave, and wended forth his way.
He sought in ev'ry house and ev'ry place,
Where as he hoped for to finde grace,
To learne what thing women love the most:
But he could not arrive in any coast,
Where as he mighte find in this mattere
Two creatures *according in fere.* *agreeing together*
Some said that women loved best richess,
Some said honour, and some said jolliness,
Some rich array, and some said lust* a-bed, *pleasure
And oft time to be widow and be wed.
Some said, that we are in our heart most eased
When that we are y-flatter'd and y-praised.
He *went full nigh the sooth,* I will not lie; *came very near
A man shall win us best with flattery; the truth*
And with attendance, and with business
Be we y-limed,* bothe more and less. *caught with bird-lime
And some men said that we do love the best
For to be free, and do *right as us lest,* *whatever we please*
And that no man reprove us of our vice,
But say that we are wise, and nothing nice,* *foolish <7>
For truly there is none among us all,

If any wight will *claw us on the gall,* *see note <8>*
That will not kick, for that he saith us sooth:
Assay,* and he shall find it, that so do'th. *try
For be we never so vicious within,
We will be held both wise and clean of sin.
And some men said, that great delight have we
For to be held stable and eke secre,* *discreet
And in one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
And not bewray* a thing that men us tell. *give away
But that tale is not worth a rake-stele.* *rake-handle
Pardie, we women canne nothing hele,* *hide <9>
Witness on Midas; will ye hear the tale?
Ovid, amonges other thinges smale* *small
Saith, Midas had, under his longe hairs,
Growing upon his head two ass's ears;
The whiche vice he hid, as best he might,
Full subtlely from every man's sight,
That, save his wife, there knew of it no mo';
He lov'd her most, and trusted her also;
He prayed her, that to no creature
She woulde tellen of his disfigure.
She swore him, nay, for all the world to win,
She would not do that villainy or sin,
To make her husband have so foul a name:
She would not tell it for her owen shame.
But natheless her thoughte that she died,
That she so longe should a counsel hide;
Her thought it swell'd so sore about her heart
That needes must some word from her astart
And, since she durst not tell it unto man
Down to a marish fast thereby she ran,
Till she came there, her heart was all afire:
And, as a bittern bumbles* in the mire, *makes a humming noise
She laid her mouth unto the water down
"Bewray me not, thou water, with thy soun'"
Quoth she, "to thee I tell it, and no mo',
Mine husband hath long ass's eares two!
Now is mine heart all whole; now is it out;
I might no longer keep it, out of doubt."
Here may ye see, though we a time abide,
Yet out it must, we can no counsel hide.
The remnant of the tale, if ye will hear,
Read in Ovid, and there ye may it lear.* *learn
This knight, of whom my tale is specially,

When that he saw he might not come thereby,
That is to say, what women love the most,
Within his breast full sorrowful was his ghost.* *spirit
But home he went, for he might not sojourn,
The day was come, that homeward he must turn.
And in his way it happen'd him to ride,
In all his care,* under a forest side, *trouble, anxiety
Where as he saw upon a dance go
Of ladies four-and-twenty, and yet mo',
Toward this ilke* dance he drew full yern,** *same **eagerly <10>
The hope that he some wisdom there should learn;
But certainly, ere he came fully there,
Y-vanish'd was this dance, he knew not where;
No creature saw he that bare life,
Save on the green he sitting saw a wife,
A fouler wight there may no man devise.* *imagine, tell
Against* this knight this old wife gan to rise, *to meet
And said, "Sir Knight, hereforth* lieth no way. *from here
Tell me what ye are seeking, by your fay.
Paraventure it may the better be:
These olde folk know muche thing." quoth she.
My leve* mother," quoth this knight, "certain, *dear
I am but dead, but if* that I can sayn *unless
What thing it is that women most desire:
Could ye me wiss,* I would well *quite your hire."* *instruct <11>
"Plight me thy troth here in mine hand," quoth she, *reward you*
"The nexte thing that I require of thee
Thou shalt it do, if it be in thy might,
And I will tell it thee ere it be night."
"Have here my trothe," quoth the knight; "I grant."
"Thenne," quoth she, "I dare me well avaunt,* *boast, affirm
Thy life is safe, for I will stand thereby,
Upon my life the queen will say as I:
Let see, which is the proudest of them all,
That wears either a kerchief or a caul,
That dare say nay to that I shall you teach.
Let us go forth withoute longer speech
Then *rowned she a pistel* in his ear, *she whispered a secret*
And bade him to be glad, and have no fear.
When they were come unto the court, this knight
Said, he had held his day, as he had hight,* *promised
And ready was his answer, as he said.
Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,
And many a widow, for that they be wise, —

The queen herself sitting as a justice, —
Assembled be, his answer for to hear,
And afterward this knight was bid appear.
To every wight commanded was silence,
And that the knight should tell in audience,
What thing that worldly women love the best.
This knight he stood not still, as doth a beast,
But to this question anon answer'd
With manly voice, that all the court it heard,
"My liege lady, generally," quoth he,
"Women desire to have the sovereignty
As well over their husband as their love
And for to be in mast'ry him above.
This is your most desire, though ye me kill,
Do as you list, I am here at your will."
In all the court there was no wife nor maid
Nor widow, that contraried what he said,
But said, he worthy was to have his life.
And with that word up start that olde wife
Which that the knight saw sitting on the green.
"Mercy," quoth she, "my sovereign lady queen,
Ere that your court departe, do me right.
I taughte this answer unto this knight,
For which he plighted me his trothe there,
The firste thing I would of him requere,
He would it do, if it lay in his might.
Before this court then pray I thee, Sir Knight,"
Quoth she, "that thou me take unto thy wife,
For well thou know'st that I have kept* thy life. *preserved
If I say false, say nay, upon thy fay."* *faith
This knight answer'd, "Alas, and well-away!
I know right well that such was my behest.* *promise
For Godde's love choose a new request
Take all my good, and let my body go."
"Nay, then," quoth she, "I shrew* us bothe two, *curse
For though that I be old, and foul, and poor,
I n'ould* for all the metal nor the ore, *would not
That under earth is grave,* or lies above *buried
But if thy wife I were and eke thy love."
"My love?" quoth he, "nay, my damnation,
Alas! that any of my nation
Should ever so foul disparaged be.
But all for nought; the end is this, that he
Constrained was, that needs he muste wed,

And take this olde wife, and go to bed.
Now woulde some men say paraventure
That for my negligence I do no cure* *take no pains
To tell you all the joy and all th' array
That at the feast was made that ilke* day. *same
To which thing shortly answeren I shall:
I say there was no joy nor feast at all,
There was but heaviness and muche sorrow:
For privily he wed her on the morrow;
And all day after hid him as an owl,
So woe was him, his wife look'd so foul
Great was the woe the knight had in his thought
When he was with his wife to bed y-brought;
He wallow'd, and he turned to and fro.
This olde wife lay smiling evermo',
And said, "Dear husband, benedicite,
Fares every knight thus with his wife as ye?
Is this the law of king Arthoures house?
Is every knight of his thus dangerous?* *fastidious, niggardly
I am your owen love, and eke your wife
I am she, which that saved hath your life
And certes yet did I you ne'er unright.
Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?
Ye fare like a man had lost his wit.
What is my guilt? for God's love tell me it,
And it shall be amended, if I may."
"Amended!" quoth this knight; "alas, nay, nay,
It will not be amended, never mo';
Thou art so loathly, and so old also,
And thereto* comest of so low a kind, *in addition
That little wonder though I wallow and wind;* *writhe, turn about
So woulde God, mine hearte woulde brest!"* *burst
"Is this," quoth she, "the cause of your unrest?"
"Yea, certainly," quoth he; "no wonder is."
"Now, Sir," quoth she, "I could amend all this,
If that me list, ere it were dayes three,
So well ye mighte bear you unto me. *if you could conduct
But, for ye speaken of such gentleness yourself well
As is descended out of old richess, towards me*
That therefore shalle ye be gentlemen;
Such arrogancy is *not worth a hen.* *worth nothing
Look who that is most virtuous alway,
Prive and apert, and most intendeth aye *in private and public*
To do the gentle deedes that he can;

And take him for the greatest gentleman.
Christ will,* we claim of him our gentleness, *wills, requires
Not of our elders* for their old richess. *ancestors
For though they gave us all their heritage,
For which we claim to be of high parage,* *birth, descent
Yet may they not bequeathe, for no thing,
To none of us, their virtuous living
That made them gentlemen called to be,
And bade us follow them in such degree.
Well can the wise poet of Florence,
That highte Dante, speak of this sentence:* *sentiment
Lo, in such manner* rhyme is Dante's tale. *kind of
'Full seld'* upriseth by his branches smale *seldom
Prowess of man, for God of his goodness
Wills that we claim of him our gentleness;' <12>
For of our elders may we nothing claim
But temp'ral things that man may hurt and maim.
Eke every wight knows this as well as I,
If gentleness were planted naturally
Unto a certain lineage down the line,
Prive and apert, then would they never fine* *cease
To do of gentleness the fair office
Then might they do no villainy nor vice.
Take fire, and bear it to the darkest house
Betwixt this and the mount of Caucasus,
And let men shut the doores, and go thenne,* *thence
Yet will the fire as fair and lighte brenne* *burn
As twenty thousand men might it behold;
Its office natural aye will it hold, *it will perform its
On peril of my life, till that it die. natural duty*
Here may ye see well how that gentery* *gentility, nobility
Is not annexed to possession,
Since folk do not their operation
Alway, as doth the fire, lo, *in its kind* *from its very nature*
For, God it wot, men may full often find
A lorde's son do shame and villainy.
And he that will have price* of his gent'ry, *esteem, honour
For* he was boren of a gentle house, *because
And had his elders noble and virtuous,
And will himselfe do no gentle deedes,
Nor follow his gentle ancestry, that dead is,
He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
For villain sinful deedes make a churl.
For gentleness is but the renomee* *renown

Of thine ancestors, for their high bounte,* *goodness, worth
Which is a strange thing to thy person:
Thy gentleness cometh from God alone.
Then comes our very* gentleness of grace; *true
It was no thing bequeath'd us with our place.
Think how noble, as saith Valerius,
Was thilke* Tullius Hostilius, *that
That out of povert' rose to high
Read in Senec, and read eke in Boece,
There shall ye see express, that it no drede* is, *doubt
That he is gentle that doth gentle deedes.
And therefore, leve* husband, I conclude, *dear
Albeit that mine ancestors were rude,
Yet may the highe God, — and so hope I, —
Grant me His grace to live virtuously:
Then am I gentle when that I begin
To live virtuously, and waive* sin. *forsake
"And whereas ye of povert' me repreve,* *reproach
The highe God, on whom that we believe,
In wilful povert' chose to lead his life:
And certes, every man, maiden, or wife
May understand that Jesus, heaven's king,
Ne would not choose a virtuous living.
Glad povert' is an honest thing, certain; *poverty cheerfully
This will Senec and other clerkes sayn endured*
Whoso that *holds him paid of* his povert', *is satisfied with*
I hold him rich though he hath not a shirt.
He that coveteth is a poore wight
For he would have what is not in his might
But he that nought hath, nor coveteth to have,
Is rich, although ye hold him but a knave.* *slave, abject wretch
Very povert' is sinne, properly. *the only true poverty is sin*
Juvenal saith of povert' merrily:
The poore man, when he goes by the way
Before the thieves he may sing and play <13>
Povert' is hateful good,<14> and, as I guess,
A full great *bringer out of business;* *deliver from trouble*
A great amender eke of sapience
To him that taketh it in patience.
Povert' is this, although it seem elenge* *strange <15>
Possession that no wight will challenge
Povert' full often, when a man is low,
Makes him his God and eke himself to know
Povert' a spectacle* is, as thinketh me *a pair of spectacles

Through which he may his very* friendes see. *true
And, therefore, Sir, since that I you not grieve,
Of my povert' no more me repreve.* *reproach
"Now, Sir, of elde* ye repreve me: *age
And certes, Sir, though none authority* *text, dictum
Were in no book, ye gentles of honour
Say, that men should an olde wight honour,
And call him father, for your gentleness;
And authors shall I finden, as I guess.
Now there ye say that I am foul and old,
Then dread ye not to be a cokewold.* *cuckold
For filth, and elde, all so may I the,* *thrive
Be greate wardens upon chastity.
But natheless, since I know your delight,
I shall fulfil your wordly appetite.
Choose now," quoth she, "one of these thinges tway,
To have me foul and old till that I dey,* *die
And be to you a true humble wife,
And never you displease in all my life:
Or elles will ye have me young and fair,
And take your aventure of the repair* *resort
That shall be to your house because of me, —
Or in some other place, it may well be?
Now choose yourselfe whether that you liketh.
This knight adviseth* him and sore he siketh,** *considered **sighed
But at the last he said in this mannere;
"My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
I put me in your wise governance,
Choose for yourself which may be most pleasance
And most honour to you and me also;
I *do no force* the whether of the two: *care not
For as you liketh, it sufficeth me."
"Then have I got the mastery," quoth she,
"Since I may choose and govern as me lest."* *pleases
"Yea, certes wife," quoth he, "I hold it best."
"Kiss me," quoth she, "we are no longer wroth,* *at variance
For by my troth I will be to you both;
This is to say, yea, bothe fair and good.
I pray to God that I may *sterve wood,* *die mad*
But* I to you be all so good and true, *unless
As ever was wife since the world was new;
And but* I be to-morrow as fair to seen, *unless
As any lady, emperess or queen,
That is betwixt the East and eke the West

Do with my life and death right as you lest.* *please
Cast up the curtain, and look how it is."
And when the knight saw verily all this,
That she so fair was, and so young thereto,
For joy he hent* her in his armes two: *took
His hearte bathed in a bath of bliss,
A thousand times *on row* he gan her kiss: *in succession*
And she obeyed him in every thing
That mighte do him pleasance or liking.
And thus they live unto their lives' end
In perfect joy; and Jesus Christ us send
Husbandes meek and young, and fresh in bed,
And grace to overlive them that we wed.
And eke I pray Jesus to short their lives,
That will not be governed by their wives.
And old and angry niggards of dispence,* *expense
God send them soon a very pestilence!

Notes to the Wife of Bath's Tale

1. It is not clear whence Chaucer derived this tale. Tyrwhitt thinks it was taken from the story of Florent, in the first book of Gower's "Confessio Amantis;" or perhaps from an older narrative from which Gower himself borrowed. Chaucer has condensed and otherwise improved the fable, especially by laying the scene, not in Sicily, but at the court of our own King Arthur.
2. Limitours: begging friars. See note 18 to the prologue to the Tales.
3. Thorpes: villages. Compare German, "Dorf,"; Dutch, "Dorp."
4. Undermeles: evening-tides, afternoons; "undern" signifies the evening; and "mele," corresponds to the German "Mal" or "Mahl," time.
5. Incubus: an evil spirit supposed to do violence to women; a nightmare.
6. Where he had been hawking after waterfowl. Froissart says that any one engaged in this sport "alloit en riviere."
7. Nice: foolish; French, "niais."
8. Claw us on the gall: Scratch us on the sore place. Compare, "Let the galled jade wince." Hamlet iii. 2.
9. Hele: hide; from Anglo-Saxon, "helan," to hide, conceal.
10. Yern: eagerly; German, "gern."
11. Wiss: instruct; German, "weisen," to show or counsel.
12. Dante, "Purgatorio", vii. 121.
13. "Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator" — "Satires," x. 22.
14. In a fabulous conference between the Emperor Adrian and the philosopher Secundus, reported by Vincent of Beauvais, occurs the passage which Chaucer here paraphrases: — "Quid est Paupertas? Odibile bonum; sanitas mater; remotio Curarum; sapientae repertrix; negotium sine damno; possessio absque calumnia; sine sollicitudinae felicitas." (What is Poverty? A hateful good; a mother of health; a putting away of cares; a discoverer of wisdom; business without injury; ownership without

calumny; happiness without anxiety)
15. Elenge: strange; from French "eloigner," to remove.