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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

A BALLAD SENT TO KING RICHARD

SOMETIME this world was so steadfast and stable,
That man's word was held obligation;
And now it is so false and deceivable,* *deceitful
That word and work, as in conclusion,
Be nothing one; for turned up so down
Is all this world, through meed* and wilfulness, *bribery
That all is lost for lack of steadfastness.
What makes this world to be so variable,
But lust* that folk have in dissension? *pleasure
For now-a-days a man is held unable* *fit for nothing
But if he can, by some collusion,** *unless* *fraud, trick
Do his neighbour wrong or oppression.
What causeth this but wilful wretchedness,
That all is lost for lack of steadfastness?
Truth is put down, reason is holden fable;
Virtue hath now no domination;
Pity exil'd, no wight is merciable;
Through covetise is blent* discretion; *blinded
The worlde hath made permutation
From right to wrong, from truth to fickleness,
That all is lost for lack of steadfastness.
L'Envoy.
O Prince! desire to be honourable;
Cherish thy folk, and hate extortion;
Suffer nothing that may be reprovable* *a subject of reproach
To thine estate, done in thy region;* *kingdom
Show forth the sword of castigation;
Dread God, do law, love thorough worthiness,
And wed thy folk again to steadfastness!
L'ENVOY OF CHAUCER TO BUKTON. <1>
My Master Bukton, when of Christ our King
Was asked, What is truth or soothfastness?
He not a word answer'd to that asking,
As who saith, no man is all true, I guess;
And therefore, though I highte* to express *promised
The sorrow and woe that is in marriage,
I dare not write of it no wickedness,
Lest I myself fall eft* in such dotage.** *again **folly

I will not say how that it is the chain
Of Satanas, on which he gnaweth ever;
But I dare say, were he out of his pain,
As by his will he would be bounden never.
But thilke* doated fool that eft had lever *that
Y-chained be, than out of prison creep,
God let him never from his woe dissever,
Nor no man him bewaile though he weep!
But yet, lest thou do worse, take a wife;
Bet is to wed than burn in worse wise; <2>
But thou shalt have sorrow on thy flesh *thy life,* *all thy life*
And be thy wife's thrall, as say these wise.
And if that Holy Writ may not suffice,
Experience shall thee teache, so may hap,
That thee were lever to be taken in Frise, <3>
Than eft* to fall of wedding in the trap. *again
This little writ, proverbes, or figure,
I sende you; take keep* of it, I read! *heed
"Unwise is he that can no weal endure;
If thou be sicker,* put thee not in dread."** *in security **danger
The Wife of Bath I pray you that you read,
Of this mattere which that we have on hand.
God grante you your life freely to lead
In freedom, for full hard is to be bond.

Notes to L'Envoy of Chaucer to Bukton.

1. Tyrwhitt, founding on the reference to the Wife of Bath, places this among Chaucer's latest compositions; and states that one Peter de Bukton held the office of king's escheator for Yorkshire in 1397. In some of the old editions, the verses were made the Envoy to the Book of the Duchess Blanche — in very bad taste, when we consider that the object of that poem was to console John of Gaunt under the loss of his wife.

2. "But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." 1 Cor. vii. 9

3. Lever to be taken in Frise: better to be taken prisoner in Friesland — where probably some conflict was raging at the time.