

Introduction

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The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” was written at a time when the social structure of England was evolving, allowing for a merchant class to emerge of which the Wife of Bath is a prime example. The story provides insight on women’s roles in the Late Middle Ages when they could occupy only three stations in society: maiden, widow or wife. The Wife of Bath is unique in this context: as a childless widow, she has inherited her husbands’ wealth (as property was passed down to sons even if their mothers were still alive) which allows for more autonomy than other women of the time. The character in this story was one of Chaucer’s most developed with the prologue almost twice as long as the actual tale itself; it is remembered as one of the best-known in the collection. She calls herself “Alys” and “Alyson” though this is also the name of a friend she references and various other characters throughout the *Tales* which causes confusion for students and scholars alike.

Prologue

In the Prologue, we learn some important information about the Wife of Bath, namely that she has been married five times and therefore will be speaking about “wo that is in mariage.” She quickly recounts her first three marriages, to older men, starting at age 12. Her fourth marriage was to a philanderer who she repaid by making him believe she, too, had been unfaithful. The fifth marriage is to a younger man, Jankyn, who is physically abusive (his beatings leave her deaf in one ear) and an unrepentant misogynist; they get into a heated argument when she tears some pages from his copy of the “Book of Wikked Wyves” though, after this, he concedes his power to her in the relationship. She is then interrupted by the Friar who complains of the “long preamble” she has provided. As a widow five times over, she would have been seen as a “loathly lady”—a woman who remarries in order to satisfy her sexual desires (something the Church equated with bigamy at the time). But the Wife of Bath knows the stories of many holy men who have had multiple wives and her adept appeal to the Scriptures puts her in direct conflict with the teachings of clerics. In her opinion, her history of multiple marriages has made her an expert on marital relations, and certainly more so than celibate, male clergy. The Wife of Bath argues, above all, that women are morally identical to men which contradicts the prevailing double standard of her era.

Summary of the Tale

The tale starts off with this Knight who has raped a young woman and for some reason the Queen wants to give him a chance to redeem himself. King Arthur wants to kill the Knight but then decides to leave this punishment in the Queen’s hand. The Queen gives the Knight twelve months and one day to bring back the answer to the question “what do women most desire?” If the knight can’t find the answer to the question then he will be killed. He sets out on a long journey to find the answer to the Queen’s question. He asks many women and many an answer he receives; none of which have set well with the knight. The last has come to find what he is in search of and he still is bewildered. He comes upon this old, ugly lady who tells him that she has what he is searching for and he will pay for her wisdom. She gives him the answer to the question and shares it with the Queen. She is pleased and releases him so his life is spared. The old lady wants the handsome knight to marry her and he gave his word that he would do whatever she asked of him. They marry and the knight is miserable and treats her terribly. On their wedding night, the old woman is upset that he is repulsed by her in bed. She reminds him that her looks can be an asset—she will be a virtuous wife to him because no other men would desire her. She asks him which one he would prefer—a wife who is true and loyal or a beautiful young woman, who may not be faithful. The Knight responds by saying that the choice is hers. Knowing that she has the ultimate power now, him giving her full control, she promises beauty and fidelity. The Knight turns to look at the old woman again, but now finds a young and lovely woman. The old woman makes “what women want most” and the answer that she gave true to him, sovereignty (“Wife of Bath’s Tale”).

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

“Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, were good enough for me,
To speak of woe that is in all marriage;
For, masters, since I was twelve years of age,
5 Thanks be to God who is forever alive,
Of husbands at church door have I had five;
For men so many times have married me;
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But someone told me not so long ago
10 That since Our Lord, save once, would never go
To wedding that at Cana in Galilee,
Thus, by this same example, showed he me
I never should have married more than once.
Lo and behold! What sharp words, for the nonce,
15 Beside a well Lord Jesus, God and man,
Spoke in reproving the Samaritan:
“For thou hast had five husbands,” thus said he,
“And he whom thou hast now to be with thee
Is not thine husband.” Thus he said that day,
20 But what he meant thereby I cannot say;
And I would ask now why that same fifth man
Was not husband to the Samaritan?
How many might she have, then, in marriage?
For I have never heard, in all my age,
25 Clear exposition of this number shown,
Though men may guess and argue up and down.
But well I know and say, and do not lie,
God bade us to increase and multiply;
That worthy text can I well understand.
30 And well I know he said, too, my husband
Should father leave, and mother, and cleave to me;
But no specific number mentioned He,

Whether of bigamy or octogamy;
Why should men speak of it reproachfully?

lines 35-82: The Wife of Bath's opinion about marriage and virginity

Lo, there's the wise old king Dan Solomon;
I understand he had more wives than one;
And now would God it were permitted me
To be refreshed one half as oft as he!
Which gift of God he had for all his wives!
40 No man has such that in this world now lives.
God knows, this noble king, it strikes my wit,
The first night he had many a merry fit
With each of them, so much he was alive!
Praise be to God that I have wedded five!
45 (Of whom I did pick out and choose the best
Both for their nether purse and for their chest
Different schools make divers perfect clerks,
Different methods learned in sundry works
Make the good workman perfect, certainly.
50 Of full five husbands tutoring am I.)
Welcome the sixth whenever come he shall.
Forsooth, I'll not keep chaste for good and all;
When my good husband from the world is gone,
Some Christian man shall marry me anon;
55 For then, the apostle says that I am free
To wed, in God's name, where it pleases me.
He says that to be wedded is no sin;
Better to marry than to burn within.
What care I though folk speak reproachfully
60 Of wicked Lamech and his bigamy?
I know well Abraham was holy man,
And Jacob, too, as far as know I can;
And each of them had spouses more than two;

And many another holy man also.

65 Or can you say that you have ever heard
That God has ever by His express word
Marriage forbidden? Pray you, now, tell me.

Or where commanded he virginity?

I read as well as you no doubt have read

70 The apostle when he speaks of maidenhead;

He said, commandment of the Lord he'd none.

Men may advise a woman to be one,

But such advice is not commandment, no;

He left the thing to our own judgment so.

75 For had Lord God commanded maidenhood,

He'd have condemned all marriage as not good;

And certainly, if there were no seed sown,

Virginity, where then should it be grown?

Paul dared not to forbid us, at the least,

80 A thing whereof his master'd no behest.

The dart is set up for virginity;

Catch it who can; who runs best let us see.

lines 83-100: About St. Paul's virginity

But this word is not meant for every wight,

But where God wills to give it, of His might.

85 I know well that the apostle was a virgin;

Nevertheless, and though he wrote and urged in,

He would that everyone were such as he,

All is not counsel to virginity;

And so to be a wife he gave me leave

90 Out of permission; there's no shame should
grieve

In marrying me, if that my mate should die,

Without exception, too, of bigamy.

And though 'twere good no woman flesh to touch,

He meant, in his own bed or on his couch;

95 For peril 'tis fire and tow to assemble;

You know what this example may resemble.

This is the sum: he held virginity

Nearer perfection than marriage for frailty.

And frailty's all, I say, save he and she

100 Would lead their lives throughout in chastity.

lines 101-120: About virginity in general

I grant this well, I have no great envy

Though maidenhood's preferred to bigamy;

Let those who will be clean, body and ghost,

Of my condition I will make no boast.

105 For well you know, a lord in his household,

He has not every vessel all of gold;

Some are of wood and serve well all their days.

God calls folk unto him in sundry ways,

And each one has from God a proper gift,

110 Some this, some that, as pleases him to shift.

Virginity is great perfection known,

And continence also with devotion shown.

But Christ, who of perfection is the well,

Bade not each separate man he should go sell

115 All that he had and give it to the poor

And follow him in such wise going before.

He spoke to those that would live perfectly;

And, masters, by your leave, such am not I.

I will devote the flower of all my age

120 To all the acts and harvests of marriage.

lines 121-140: The purpose of the genitals

Tell me also, to what purpose or end

The genitals were made, that I defend,

And for what benefit was man first wrought?

Trust you right well, they were not made for naught.

125 Explain who will and argue up and down

That they were made for passing out, as known,

Of urine, and our two belongings small

Were just to tell a female from a male,

And for no other cause – ah, say you no?

130 Experience knows well it is not so;

And, so the clerics be not with me wroth,

I say now that they have been made for both,

That is to say, for duty and for ease

In getting, when we do not God displease.

135 Why should men otherwise in their books set

That man shall pay unto his wife his debt?

Now wherewith should he ever make payment,

Except he used his blessed instrument?

Then on a creature were devised these things

140 For urination and engenderings.

lines 141-168: How a husband should pay his wife

But I say not that every one is bound,

Who's fitted out and furnished as I've found,

To go and use it to beget an heir;

Then men would have for chastity no care.

145 Christ was a maid, and yet shaped like a man,

And many a saint, since this old world began,

Yet has lived ever in perfect chastity.

I bear no malice to virginity;

Let such be bread of purest white wheat-seed,

150 And let us wives be called but barley bread;

And yet with barley bread, if Mark you scan

Jesus Our Lord refreshed full many a man.

In such condition as God places us

I'll persevere, I'm not fastidious.

155 In wifehood I will use my instrument

As freely as my Maker has it sent.

If I be niggardly, God give me sorrow!

My husband he shall have it, eve and morrow,

When he's pleased to come forth and pay his debt.

160 I'll not delay, a husband I will get

Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall

And have his tribulations therewithal

Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.

I have the power during all my life

165 Over his own good body, and not he.

For thus the apostle told it unto me;

And bade our husbands that they love us well.

And all this pleases me whereof I tell."

lines 169-193: The Pardoner's interruption

Up rose the pardoner, and that anon.

170 "Now dame," said he, "by God and by Saint John,

You are a noble preacher in this case!

I was about to wed a wife, alas!

Why should I buy this on my flesh so dear?

No, I would rather wed no wife this year."

175 "But wait," said she, "my tale is not begun;

Nay, you shall drink from out another tun

Before I cease, and savour worse than ale.

And when I shall have told you all my tale

Of tribulation that is in marriage,

180 Whereof I've been an expert all my age,

That is to say, myself have been the whip,

Then may you choose whether you will go sip

Out of that very tun which I shall broach.

Beware of it before you too near approach;

185 For I shall give examples more than ten.

Whoso will not be warned by other men
By him shall other men corrected be,
The self-same words has written Ptolemy;
Read in his Almagest and find it there.”

190 “Lady, I pray you, if your will it were,”
Spoke up this pardonor, “as you began,
Tell forth your tale, nor spare for any man,
And teach us younger men of your technique.”

lines 194-229: About the Wife of Bath’s five husbands

“Gladly,” said she, “since it may please, not pique.

195 But yet I pray of all this company
That if I speak from my own phantasy,
They will not take amiss the things I say;
For my intention’s only but to play.

“Now, sirs, now will I tell you forth my tale.

200 And as I may drink ever wine and ale,
I will tell truth of husbands that I’ve had,
For three of them were good and two were bad.
The three were good men and were rich and old.

Not easily could they the promise hold

205 Whereby they had been bound to cherish me.

You know well what I mean by that, pardie!

So help me God, I laugh now when I think
How pitifully by night I made them swink;
And by my faith I set by it no store.

210 They’d given me their gold, and treasure more;

I needed not do longer diligence

To win their love, or show them reverence.

They all loved me so well, by God above,

I never did set value on their love!

215 A woman wise will strive continually

To get herself loved, when she’s not, you see.

But since I had them wholly in my hand,
And since to me they’d given all their land,
Why should I take heed, then, that I should please,
220 Save it were for my profit or my ease?

I set them so to work, that, by my fay,
Full many a night they sighed out ‘Welaway!’
The bacon was not brought them home, I trow,
That some men have in Essex at Dunmowe.

225 I governed them so well, by my own law,
That each of them was happy as a daw,

And fain to bring me fine things from the fair.

And they were right glad when I spoke them fair;

For God knows that I nagged them mercilessly.

lines 230-240: About the art of lying

230 Now hearken how I bore me properly,

All you wise wives that well can understand.

Thus shall you speak and wrongfully demand;

For half so brazenfacedly can no man

Swear to his lying as a woman can.

235 I say not this to wives who may be wise,

Except when they themselves do misadvise.

A wise wife, if she knows what’s for her good,

Will swear the crow is mad, and in this mood

Call up for witness to it her own maid;

240 But hear me now, for this is what I said.

lines 241-262: The Wife of Bath on how to lecture a husband

““Sir Dotard, is it thus you stand today?

Why is my neighbour’s wife so fine and gay?

She’s honoured over all where’er she goes;

I sit at home, I have no decent clothes.

245 What do you do there at my neighbour’s house?

Is she so fair? Are you so amorous?
Why whisper to our maid? Benedicite!
Sir Lecher old, let your seductions be!
And if I have a gossip or a friend,
250 Innocently, you blame me like a fiend
If I but walk, for company, to his house!
You come home here as drunken as a mouse,
And preach there on your bench, a curse on you!
You tell me it's a great misfortune, too,
255 To wed a girl who costs more than she's worth;
And if she's rich and of a higher birth,
You say it's torment to abide her folly
And put up with her pride and melancholy.
And if she be right fair, you utter knave,
260 You say that every lecher will her have;
She may no while in chastity abide
That is assailed by all and on each side.

lines 263-290: A shrew's proverb

You say, some men desire us for our gold,
Some for our shape and some for fairness told:
265 And some, that she can either sing or dance,
And some, for courtesy and dalliance;
Some for her hands and for her arms so small;
Thus all goes to the devil in your tale.
You say men cannot keep a castle wall
270 That's long assailed on all sides, and by all.
And if that she be foul, you say that she
Hankers for every man that she may see;
For like a spaniel will she leap on him
Until she finds a man to be victim;
275 And not a grey goose swims there in the lake
But finds a gander willing her to take.

You say, it is a hard thing to enfold
Her whom no man will in his own arms hold.
This say you, worthless, when you go to bed;
280 And that no wise man needs thus to be wed,
No, nor a man that hearkens unto heaven.
With furious thunder-claps and fiery levin
May your thin, withered, wrinkled neck be broke:
You say that dripping eaves, and also smoke,
285 And wives contentious, will make men to flee
Out of their houses; ah, benedicite!
What ails such an old fellow so to chide?
You say that all we wives our vices hide
Till we are married, then we show them well;
290 That is a scoundrel's proverb, let me tell!

lines 291-308: A wife is no horse and cannot be tested

You say that oxen, asses, horses, hounds
Are tried out variously, and on good grounds;
Basins and bowls, before men will them buy,
And spoons and stools and all such goods you try.
295 And so with pots and clothes and all array;
But of their wives men get no test, you say,
Till they are married, base old dotard you!
And then we show what evil we can do.
You say also that it displeases me
300 Unless you praise and flatter my beauty,
And save you gaze always upon my face
And call me "lovely lady" every place;
And save you make a feast upon that day
When I was born, and give me garments gay;
305 And save due honour to my nurse is paid
As well as to my faithful chambermaid,
And to my father's folk and his allies-

Thus you go on, old barrel full of lies!

lines 309-329: Envy and the power of gold

And yet of our apprentice, young Jenkin,
310 For his crisp hair, showing like gold so fine,
Because he squires me walking up and down,
A false suspicion in your mind is sown;
I'd give him naught, though you were dead tomorrow.
But tell me this, why do you hide, with sorrow,
315 The keys to your strong-box away from me?
It is my gold as well as yours, pardie.
Why would you make an idiot of your dame?
Now by Saint James, but you shall miss your aim,
You shall not be, although like mad you scold,
320 Master of both my body and my gold;
One you'll forgo in spite of both your eyes;
Why need you seek me out or set on spies?
I think you'd like to lock me in your chest!
You should say: "Dear wife, go where you like best,
325 Amuse yourself, I will believe no tales;
You're my wife Alis true, and truth prevails."
We love no man that guards us or gives charge
Of where we go, for we will be at large.

lines 330-342: Sexual favour and the power of gold

Of all men the most blessed may he be,
330 That wise astrologer, Dan Ptolemy,
Who says this proverb in his Almagest:
'Of all men he's in wisdom the highest
That nothing cares who has the world in hand.'
And by this proverb shall you understand:
335 Since you've enough, why do you reck or care
How merrily all other folks may fare?

For certainly, old dotard, by your leave,
You shall have cunt all right enough at eve.
He is too much a niggard who's so tight
340 That from his lantern he'll give none a light.
For he'll have never the less light, by gad;
Since you've enough, you need not be so sad.

lines 343-353: The Wife of Bath rejects austerity and frugality

You say, also, that if we make us gay
With clothing, all in costliest array,
345 That it's a danger to our chastity;
And you must back the saying up, pardie!
Repeating these words in the apostle's name:
"In habits meet for chastity, not shame,
Your women shall be garmented," said he,
350 "And not with broidered hair, or jewellery,
Or pearls, or gold, or costly gowns and chic;"
After your text and after your rubric
I will not follow more than would a gnat.

lines 354-362: The Wife of Bath compared to a cat

You said this, too, that I was like a cat;
355 For if one care to singe a cat's furred skin,
Then would the cat remain the house within;
And if the cat's coat be all sleek and gay,
She will not keep in house a half a day,
But out she'll go, before dawn of any day,
360 To show her skin and caterwaul and play.
This is to say, if I'm a little gay,
To show my rags I'll gad about all day.

lines 363-384: Bondage in the marriage band

Sir Ancient Fool, what ails you with your spies?
 Though you pray Argus, with his hundred eyes,
 365 To be my bodyguard and do his best,
 Faith, he sha'n't hold me, save I am modest;
 I could delude him easily- trust me!

You said, also, that there are three things- three-
 The which things are a trouble on this earth,
 370 And that no man may ever endure the fourth:
 O dear Sir Rogue, may Christ cut short your life!
 Yet do you preach and say a hateful wife
 Is to be reckoned one of these mischances.
 Are there no other kinds of resemblances
 375 That you may liken thus your parables to,
 But must a hapless wife be made to do?
 You liken woman's love to very Hell,
 To desert land where waters do not well.
 You liken it, also, unto wildfire;
 380 The more it burns, the more it has desire
 To consume everything that burned may be.
 You say that just as worms destroy a tree,
 Just so a wife destroys her own husband;
 Men know this who are bound in marriage band."

lines 385-400: About cheating

Masters, like this, as you must understand,
 Did I my old men charge and censure, and
 Claim that they said these things in drunkenness;
 And all was false, but yet I took witness
 Of Jenkin and of my dear niece also.
 390 O Lord, the pain I gave them and the woe,
 All guiltless, too, by God's grief exquisite!
 For like a stallion could I neigh and bite.

I could complain, though mine was all the guilt,
 Or else, full many a time, I'd lost the tilt.
 395 Whoso comes first to mill first gets meal
 ground;
 I whimpered first and so did them confound.
 They were right glad to hasten to excuse
 Things they had never done, save in my ruse.
 With wenches would I charge him, by this hand,
 400 When, for some illness, he could hardly stand.

lines 401-436: Envy, payment and ...

Yet tickled this the heart of him, for he
 Deemed it was love produced such jealousy.
 I swore that all my walking out at night
 Was but to spy on girls he kept outright;
 405 And under cover of that I had much mirth.
 For all such wit is given us at birth;
 Deceit, weeping, and spinning, does God give
 To women, naturally, the while they live.
 And thus of one thing I speak boastfully,
 410 I got the best of each one, finally,
 By trick, or force, or by some kind of thing,
 As by continual growls or murmuring;
 Especially in bed had they mischance,
 There would I chide and give them no pleasance;
 415 I would no longer in the bed abide
 If I but felt his arm across my side,
 Till he had paid his ransom unto me;
 Then would I let him do his nicety.
 And therefore to all men this tale I tell,
 420 Let gain who may, for everything's to sell.
 With empty hand men may no falcons lure;
 For profit would I all his lust endure,
 And make for him a well-feigned appetite;

Yet I in bacon never had delight;

425 And that is why I used so much to chide.

For if the pope were seated there beside

I'd not have spared them, no, at their own board.

For by my truth, I paid them, word for word.

So help me the True God Omnipotent,

430 Though I right now should make my testament,

I owe them not a word that was not quit.

I brought it so about, and by my wit,

That they must give it up, as for the best,

Or otherwise we'd never have had rest.

435 For though he glared and scowled like lion mad,

Yet failed he of the end he wished he had.

lines 437-456: ... pleasure

Then would I say: "Good dearie, see you keep

In mind how meek is Wilkin, our old sheep;

Come near, my spouse, come let me kiss your cheek!

440 You should be always patient, aye, and meek,

And have a sweetly scrupulous tenderness,

Since you so preach of old Job's patience, yes.

Suffer always, since you so well can preach;

And, save you do, be sure that we will teach

445 That it is well to leave a wife in peace.

One of us two must bow, to be at ease;

And since a man's more reasonable, they say,

Than woman is, you must have patience aye.

What ails you that you grumble thus and groan?

450 Is it because you'd have my cunt alone?

Why take it all, lo, have it every bit;

Peter! Beshrew you but you're fond of it!

For if I would go peddle my belle chose,

I could walk out as fresh as is a rose;

455 But I will keep it for your own sweet tooth.

You are to blame, by God I tell the truth."

lines 457-474: The Wife of Bath claims the right to drink

Such were the words I had at my command.

Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.

"My fourth husband, he was a reveller,

460 That is to say, he kept a paramour;

And young and full of passion then was I,

Stubborn and strong and jolly as a pie.

Well could I dance to tune of harp, nor fail

To sing as well as any nightingale

465 When I had drunk a good draught of sweet wine.

Metellius, the foul churl and the swine,

Did with a staff deprive his wife of life

Because she drank wine; had I been his wife

He never should have frightened me from drink;

470 For after wine, of Venus must I think:

For just as surely as cold produces hail,

A liquorish mouth must have a lickerish tail.

In drunken women has no means of defence,

This know all lechers by experience.

lines 475-486: About youth and aging

But Lord Christ! When I do remember me

Upon my youth and on my jollity,

It tickles me about my heart's deep root.

To this day does my heart sing in salute

That I have had my world in my own time.

480 But age, alas! that poisons every prime,

Has taken away my beauty and my pith;

Let go, farewell, the devil go therewith!

The flour is gone, there is no more to tell,

The bran, as best I may, must I now sell;
485 But yet to be right merry I'll try, and
Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.

lines 487-508: The Wife of Bath's fourth husband

I say that in my heart I'd great despite
When he of any other had delight.
But he was quit by God and by Saint Joce!
490 I made, of the same wood, a staff most gross;
Not with my body and in manner foul,
But certainly I showed so gay a soul
That in his own thick grease I made him fry
For anger and for utter jealousy.
495 By God, on earth I was his purgatory,
For which I hope his soul lives now in glory.
For God knows, many a time he sat and sung
When the shoe bitterly his foot had wrung.
There was no one, save God and he, that knew
500 How, in so many ways, I'd twist the screw.
He died when I came from Jerusalem,
And lies entombed beneath the great rood-beam,
Although his tomb is not so glorious
As was the sepulchre of Darius,
505 The which Apelles wrought full cleverly;
'Twas waste to bury him expensively.
Let him fare well. God give his soul good rest,
He now is in the grave and in his chest.

lines 509-530: The Wife of Bath's fifth husband and the market price of sex

And now of my fifth husband will I tell.
510 God grant his soul may never get to Hell!
And yet he was to me most brutal, too;
My ribs yet feel as they were black and blue,

And ever shall, until my dying day.
But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
515 And therewithal he could so well impose,
What time he wanted use of my belle chose,
That though he'd beaten me on every bone,
He could re-win my love, and that full soon.
I guess I loved him best of all, for he
520 Gave of his love most sparingly to me.
We women have, if I am not to lie,
In this love matter, a quaint fantasy;
Look out a thing we may not lightly have,
And after that we'll cry all day and crave.
525 Forbid a thing, and that thing covet we;
Press hard upon us, then we turn and flee.
Sparingly offer we our goods, when fair;
Great crowds at market for dearer ware,
And what's too common brings but little price;
530 All this knows every woman who is wise.

lines 531-548: The Wife of Bath's gossip

My fifth husband, may God his spirit bless!
Whom I took all for love, and not riches,
Had been sometime a student at Oxford,
And had left school and had come home to board
535 With my best gossip, dwelling in our town,
God save her soul! Her name was Alison.
She knew my heart and all my privy
Better than did our parish priest, s'help me!
To her confided I my secrets all.
540 For had my husband pissed against a wall,
Or done a thing that might have cost his life,
To her and to another worthy wife,
And to my niece whom I loved always well,

I would have told it – every bit I'd tell,
545 And did so, many and many a time, knows God,
Which made his face full often red and hot
For utter shame; he blamed himself that he
Had told me of so deep a privity.

lines 549-592: The Wife of Bath tells how she has enchanted her servant

So it happened that on a time, in Lent
550 For oftentimes I to my gossip went,
Since I loved always to be glad and gay
And to walk out, in March, April, and May,
From house to house, to hear the latest malice,
Jenkin the clerk, and my gossip Dame Alis,
555 And I myself into the meadows went.
My husband was in London all that Lent;
I had the greater leisure, then, to play,
And to observe, and to be seen, I say,
By pleasant folk; what knew I where my face
560 Was destined to be loved, or in what place?
Therefore I made my visits round about
To vigils and processions of devout,
To preaching too, and shrines of pilgrimage,
To miracle plays, and always to each marriage,
565 And wore my scarlet skirt before all wights.
These worms and all these moths and all these mites,
I say it at my peril, never ate;
And know you why? I wore it early and late.

Now will I tell you what befell to me.
570 I say that in the meadows walked we three
Till, truly, we had come to such dalliance,
This clerk and I, that, of my vigilance,
I spoke to him and told him how that he,

Were I a widow, might well marry me.
575 For certainly I say it not to brag,
But I was never quite without a bag
Full of the needs of marriage that I seek.
I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek
That has but one hole into which to run,
580 And if it fail of that, then all is done.

I made him think he had enchanted me;
My mother taught me all that subtlety.
And then I said I'd dreamed of him all night,
He would have slain me as I lay upright,
585 And all my bed was full of very blood;
But yet I hoped that he would do me good,
For blood betokens gold, as I was taught.
And all was false, I dreamed of him just- naught,
Save as I acted on my mother's lore,
590 As well in this thing as in many more.

But now, let's see, what was I going to say?
Aha, by God, I know! It goes this way.

lines 593-632: The funeral of the fourth husband

When my fourth husband lay upon his bier,
I wept enough and made but sorry cheer,
595 As wives must always, for it's custom's grace,
And with my kerchief covered up my face;
But since I was provided with a mate,
I really wept but little, I may state.

To church my man was borne upon the morrow
600 By neighbours, who for him made signs of
sorrow;
And Jenkin, our good clerk, was one of them.
So help me God, when rang the requiem
After the bier, I thought he had a pair
Of legs and feet so clean-cut and so fair

605 That all my heart I gave to him to hold.
He was, I think, but twenty winters old,
And I was forty, if I tell the truth;
But then I always had a young colt's tooth.
Gap-toothed I was, and that became me well;
610 I had the print of holy Venus' seal.
So help me God, I was a healthy one,
And fair and rich and young and full of fun;
And truly, as my husbands all told me,
I had the silkiest quoniam that could be.
615 For truly, I am all Venusian
In feeling, and my brain is Martian.
Venus gave me my lust, my lickerishness,
And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.
Taurus was my ascendant, with Mars therein.
620 Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
I followed always my own inclination
By virtue of my natal constellation;
Which wrought me so I never could withdraw
My Venus-chamber from a good fellow.
625 Yet have I Mars's mark upon my face,
And also in another private place.
For God so truly my salvation be
As I have never loved for policy,
But ever followed my own appetite,
630 Though he were short or tall, or black or white;
I took no heed, so that he cared for me,
How poor he was, nor even of what degree.

lines 633-652: The servant becomes the Wife of Bath's fifth husband

What should I say now, save, at the month's end,
This jolly, gentle, Jenkin clerk, my friend,
635 Had wedded me full ceremoniously,

And to him gave I all the land in fee
That ever had been given me before;
But, later I repented me full sore.
He never suffered me to have my way.
640 By God, he hit me on the ear, one day,
Because I tore out of his book a leaf,
So that from this my ear is grown quite deaf.
Stubborn I was as is a lioness,
And with my tongue a very jay, I guess,
645 And walk I would, as I had done before,
From house to house, though I should not, he swore.
For which he oftentimes would sit and preach
And read old Roman tales to me and teach
How one Sulpicius Gallus left his wife
650 And her forsook for term of all his life
Because he saw her with bared head, I say,
Looking out from his door, upon a day.
Another Roman told he of by name
Who, since his wife was at a summer-game
655 Without his knowing, he forsook her eke.
And then would he within his Bible seek
That proverb of the old Ecclesiast
Where he commands so freely and so fast
That man forbid his wife to gad about;
660 Then would he thus repeat, with never doubt:
Whoso would build his whole house out of fallows,
And spur his blind horse to run over fallows,
And let his wife alone go seeking hallows,
Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.
665 But all for naught, I didn't care a haw
For all his proverbs, nor for his old saw,
Nor yet would I by him corrected be.
I hate one that my vices tells to me,

And so do more of us- God knows!- than I.

670 This made him mad with me, and furiously,
That I'd not yield to him in any case.

Now will I tell you truth, by Saint Thomas,
Of why I tore from out his book a leaf,
For which he struck me so it made me deaf.

675 He had a book that gladly, night and day,
For his amusement he would read alway.

He called it 'Theophrastus' and 'Valerius',
At which book would he laugh, uproarious.

And, too, there sometime was a clerk at Rome,

680 A cardinal, that men called Saint Jerome,
Who made a book against Jovinian;

In which book, too, there was Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise

Who was abbess near Paris' diocese;

685 And too, the Proverbs of King Solomon,
And Ovid's Art, and books full many a one.

And all of these were bound in one volume.

And every night and day 'twas his custom,
When he had leisure and took some vacation

690 From all his other worldly occupation,
To read, within this book, of wicked wives.

He knew of them more legends and more lives
Than are of good wives written in the Bible.

For trust me, it's impossible, no libel,

695 That any cleric shall speak well of wives,
Unless it be of saints and holy lives,
But naught for other women will they do.

Who painted first the lion, tell me who?

By God, if women had but written stories,

700 As have these clerks within their oratories,
They would have written of men more wickedness

Than all the race of Adam could redress.

The children of Mercury and of Venus
Are in their lives antagonistic thus;

705 For Mercury loves wisdom and science,
And Venus loves but pleasure and expense.

Because they different dispositions own,
Each falls when other's in ascendant shown.

And God knows Mercury is desolate

710 In Pisces, wherein Venus rules in state;

And Venus falls when Mercury is raised;

Therefore no woman by a clerk is praised.

A clerk, when he is old and can naught do
Of Venus' labours worth his worn-out shoe,

715 Then sits he down and writes, in his dotage,
That women cannot keep vow of marriage!

lines 717-793: The fifth husband reads about the vices of women and lectures the WoB

But now to tell you, as I started to,
Why I was beaten for a book, pardieu.

Upon a night Jenkin, who was our sire,

720 Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,
Of Mother Eve who, by her wickedness,

First brought mankind to all his wretchedness,

For which Lord Jesus Christ Himself was slain,

Who, with His heart's blood, saved us thus again.

725 Lo here, expressly of woman, may you find
That woman was the ruin of mankind.

Then read he out how Samson lost his hairs,
Sleeping, his leman cut them with her shears;

And through this treason lost he either eye.

730 Then read he out, if I am not to lie,
Of Hercules, and Deianira's desire

That caused him to go set himself on fire.

Nothing escaped him of the pain and woe
That Socrates had with his spouses two;
735 How Xantippe threw piss upon his head;
This hapless man sat still, as he were dead;
He wiped his head, no more durst he complain
Than 'Ere the thunder ceases comes the rain.'

Then of Pasiphae, the queen of Crete,
740 For cursedness he thought the story sweet;
Fie! Say no more – it is an awful thing –
Of her so horrible lust and love-liking.

Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery,
Who caused her husband's death by treachery,
745 He read all this with greatest zest, I vow.

He told me, too, just when it was and how
Amphiaraus at Thebes lost his life;
My husband had a legend of his wife
Eriphyle who, for a brooch of gold,
750 In secrecy to hostile Greeks had told
Whereat her husband had his hiding place,
For which he found at Thebes but sorry grace.

Of Livia and Lucia told he me,
For both of them their husbands killed, you see,
755 The one for love, the other killed for hate;
Livia her husband, on an evening late,
Made drink some poison, for she was his foe.
Lucia, lecherous, loved her husband so
That, to the end he'd always of her think,
760 She gave him such a philtre, for love-drink,
That he was dead or ever it was morrow;
And husbands thus, by same means, came to sorrow.

Then did he tell how one Latumius
Complained unto his comrade Arrius

765 That in his garden grew a baleful tree
Whereon, he said, his wives, and they were three,
Had hanged themselves for wretchedness and woe.
"O brother," Arrius said, "and did they so?

Give me a graft of that same blessed tree
770 And in my garden planted it shall be!"

Of wives of later date he also read,
How some had slain their husbands in their bed
And let their lovers shag them all the night
While corpses lay upon the floor upright.

775 And some had driven nails into the brain
While husbands slept and in such wise were slain.
And some had given them poison in their drink.
He told more evil than the mind can think.

And therewithal he knew of more proverbs
780 Than in this world there grows of grass or herbs.
"Better," he said, "your habitation be
With lion wild or dragon foul," said he,
"Than with a woman who will nag and chide."

"Better," he said, "on the housetop abide
785 Than with a brawling wife down in the house;
Such are so wicked and contrarious
They hate the thing their husband loves, for aye."

He said, "a woman throws her shame away
When she throws off her smock," and further, too:

790 "A woman fair, save she be chaste also,
Is like a ring of gold in a sow's nose."
Who would imagine or who would suppose
What grief and pain were in this heart of mine?

lines 794-834: Irritation, anger, a fight, deafness and a happy end

And when I saw he'd never cease, in fine,
795 His reading in this cursed book at night,
Three leaves of it I snatched and tore outright
Out of his book, as he read on; and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheek
That in our fire he reeled and fell right down.
800 Then he got up as does a wild lion,
And with his fist he struck me on the head,
And on the floor I lay as I were dead.
And when he saw how limp and still I lay,
He was afraid and would have run away,
805 Until at last, out of my swoon I made:
'Oh, have you slain me, you false thief?' I said,
'And for my land have you thus murdered me?
Kiss me before I die, and let me be.'

He came to me and near me he knelt down,
810 And said: 'O my dear sister Alison,
So help me God, I'll never strike you more;
What I have done, you are to blame therefor.
But all the same forgiveness now I seek!
And thereupon I hit him on the cheek,
815 And said: 'Thief, so much vengeance do I
wreak!
Now will I die; I can no longer speak!
But at the last, and with much care and woe,
We made it up between ourselves. And so
He put the bridle reins within my hand
820 To have the governing of house and land;
And of his tongue and of his hand, also;
And made him burn his book, right then, oho!
And when I had thus gathered unto me

Masterfully, the entire sovereignty,
825 And he had said: 'My own true wedded wife,
Do as you please the term of all your life,
Guard your own honour and keep fair my state'-
After that day we never had debate.
God help me now, I was to him as kind
830 As any wife from Denmark unto Ind,
And also true, and so was he to me.
I pray to God, Who sits in majesty,
To bless his soul, out of His mercy dear!
Now will I tell my tale, if you will hear.'

lines 835-862: The dialogue between the Summoner and the Friar

The friar laughed when he had heard all this.
"Now dame," said he, "so have I joy or bliss
This is a long preamble to a tale!"
And when the summoner heard this friar's hail,
"Lo," said the summoner, "by God's arms two!
840 A friar will always interfere, mark you.
Behold, good men, a housefly and a friar
Will fall in every dish and matters higher.
Why speak of preambling; you in your gown?
What! Amble, trot, hold peace, or go sit down;
845 You hinder our diversion thus to inquire."
"Aye, say you so, sir summoner?" said the friar,
"Now by my faith I will, before I go,
Tell of a summoner such a tale, or so,
That all the folk shall laugh who're in this place'
850 "Otherwise, friar, I beshrew your face,"
Replied this summoner, "and beshrew me
If I do not tell tales here, two or three,
Of friars ere I come to Sittingbourne,
That certainly will give you cause to mourn,

855 For well I know your patience will be gone.”

Our host cried out, “Now peace, and that anon!”

And said he: “Let the woman tell her tale.

You act like people who are drunk with ale.

Do, lady, tell your tale, and that is best.”

860 “All ready, sir,” said she, “as you request,

If I have license of this worthy friar.”

“Yes, dame,” said he, “to hear you’s my desire.”