

That I shal make thyn herte for to morne;
For wel I woot thy patience is goon."

Our Hoste cryde, "Pees, and that anon!"
And seyde, "Lat the womman telle hir tale.

Ye fare as folk that dronken been of ale.

Do, dame, tel forth your tale, and that is best."

"Al redy, sir," quod she, "right as yow lest,

If I have licence of this worthy Frere."

"Yis, dame," quod he, "tel forth, and I wol here."

850

855

Here bigineth the Tale of the Wyf of Bath

In th' olde dayes of the king Arthour*
Of which that Britons spoken great honour,
Al was this land fullfd of fayerye.

The elf-queen with hir joly companye
Daunced ful offe in many a grene mede;

This was the olde opinion, as I rede.

I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.

But now can no man see none elves mo,

For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of limitours* and othere holy freres,

That serchen every lond and every stream,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,

Blessinge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,

Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes;
This maketh that ther been no fayeryes.

For ther as wont to walken was an elf,
Ther walketh now the limitour himself,

In undermeles and in morweninges,
And seyth his Matins and his holy thinges

As he goth in his limitacioun.

Women may go sauffy up and down;
In every bush or under every tree

Ther is noon other incubus* but he—
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

so that I shall make your heart mourn;

I can easily see that your patience is gone."

Our Host cried "Peace! And that at once!"

And said, "Let the woman tell her tale.

You behave like people who have got drunk on ale.

Tell your tale, dame; that is best."

"All ready, sir," said she, "just as you wish,

if I have the permission of this worthy Friar."

"Yes, dame," said he, "tell on and I will listen."

850

855

Here begins the Wife of Bath's Tale

In the old days of King Arthur,
of whom Britons speak great honor,
this land was all filled with fairies.

The elf queen with her jolly company
danced often in many a green meadow—
this was the old belief, as I have read;

I speak of many hundred years ago.

But now no one can see elves anymore,

for now the great charity and prayers
of limiters and other holy friars,

who search every field and stream,
as thick as specks of dust in a sunbeam,

blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, bedrooms,
cities, towns, castles, high towers,

villages, barns, stables, dairies:

this is the reason that there are no fairies.

For where an elf was wont to walk,
there now walks the limiter himself,

in afternoons and in mornings,
and says his Matins and his holy things,

as he goes about within his limits.

Women may go up and down safely;
in every bush or under every tree

there is no other incubus but he—
and he won't do anything but dishonor to them.

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And so bifel it that this King Arthour
 Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor*
 That on a day cam rydinge fro river;
 And happed that, allone as she was born,
 He saugh a mayde walkinge him biforn,
 Of whiche mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
 By verray force he rafte hir maydenheed;
 For which oppressioun was swich clamour
 And swich pursute unto the King Arthour,
 That dampned was this knight for to be deed
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed—
 Paraventure, swich was the statur tho—
 But that the queene and othere ladies mo
 So longe preyeden the king of grace,
 Til he his lyf him graunted in the place,
 And yaf him to the queene, al at hir will,
 To chese whether she wolde him save or spille.

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It so happened that this King Arthur
 had in his house a lusty bachelor,
 who one day came riding from the river;
 and it happened that he saw a maiden
 walking before him, alone as she was born.
 And from this maiden then, against her will,
 and by pure force, he took her maidenhood.
 Because of this violation, there was such a clamor
 and such petitioning to King Arthur
 that this knight was condemned to die
 according to law, and should have lost his head—
 it happened that such was the statute then—
 except that the queen and various other ladies
 prayed to the king for grace so long
 that he granted him his life on the spot,
 and gave him to the queen, completely at her will,
 to choose whether she would save or destroy him.

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The queen thanked the king heartily,
 and then spoke thus to the knight,
 one day, when she saw a fitting time:
 "You are still in such a position," said she,
 "that you have no guarantee of your life as yet.
 I will grant you life if you can tell me
 what thing it is that women most desire.
 Be wary, and keep your neck from the ax.
 And if you cannot tell it to me now,
 I will still give you leave to go
 a year and a day to seek and learn
 a sufficient answer in this matter.
 And I want a guarantee, before you go,
 that you will yield up your person in this place."
 The knight was woeful, and he sighed sorrowfully;
 but then, he could not do as he pleased.
 And in the end he decided to go off,
 and to come back again just at the end of the year,
 with such an answer as God would provide for him;
 he took his leave and went forth on his way.
 He sought in every house and every place

Wher as he hopeth for to finde grace,
To lerne what thing wommen loven most;
But he ne coude arryven in no cost
Wheras he mighte finde in this matere
Two creatures accordinge in fere.

Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse;
Somme seyde honour; somme seyde jolynesse;
Somme, riche array; somme seyden, justabedde,
And ofte tyme to be widwe and wedde.

Somme seyde that our hertes been most esed
Whan that we been y-flatered and y-pled:ed;
He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye;
A man shal winne us best with flaterye,
And with attendance and with bisnesse
Been we y-lymed, bothe more and lesse.

And somme seyden that we loven best
For to be free, and do right as us lest,
And that no man repreve us of our vyce,
But seye that we be wyse, and no thing nyce.
For trewely, ther is noon of us alle,
If any wight wol clawe us on the galle,
That we nil kike, for he seith us sooth;
Assay, and he shal finde it that so dooth.
For be we never so vicious withinne,
We wol been holden wyse and clene of sinne.

And somme seyn that greet delyt han we
For to ben holden stable and eek secree,
And in o purpos stedefasty to dwelle,
And nat biwreye thing that men us telle.
But that tale is nat worth a rake-stelle;
Pardee, we wommen comne no thing hele;
Witnesse on Myda; wol ye here the tale?
Ovyde, * amanges othere thinges smale,
Seyde Myda hadde, under his longe heres,
Growinge upon his heed two asses eres,
The whiche vyce he hidde, as he best mighte,
Ful subilly from every mannes sighte,
That, save his wyf, ther wiste of it namo.

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where he hoped to find favor,
in order to learn what thing women most love;
but he reached no land where he could find
two people who were in agreement
with each other on this matter.

Some said women love riches best;
some said honor; some said amusement;
some, rich apparel; some said pleasure in bed,
and often to be widowed and remarried.

Some said that our hearts are most soothed
when we are flattered and pampered:
he came near the truth, I will not lie;
a man can win us best with flattery,
and with constant attendance and assiduity
we are ensnared, both high and low.

And some said that we love best
to be free, and do just as we please,
and to have no man reprove us for our vice,
but say that we are wise and not at all foolish.
For truly, if anyone will scratch us
on a sore spot, there is not one of us
who will not kick for being told the truth;
try it, and he who does shall find this out.
No matter how full of vice we are within,
we wish to be thought wise and clean from sin.

And some said that we take delight
in being thought reliable and able to keep a secret
and hold steadfast to a purpose
and not betray anything that people tell us.
But that idea isn't worth a rake handle;
by heaven, we women can't conceal a thing;
witness Midas; would you hear the tale?
Ovid, among other brief matters,
said Midas had two ass's ears growing
on his head under his long hair;
which evil he hid from everyone's sight
as artfully as he could,
so that no one knew of it except his wife.

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He loved hir most, and trusted hir also;
 He preyede hir, that to no creature
 She sholde tellen of his disfigure.

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She swoor him nay, for al this world to winne,
 She nolde do that vileinye or sinne

To make hir housbond han so foul a name;
 She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.

But natheles, hir thoughte that she dyde
 That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde;

Hir thoughte it swal so sore aboute hir herte
 That nedely som word hir moste asterete;

And sith she dorste telle it to no man,
 Down to a mareys faste by she ran—

Til she came there, hir herte was afyre—
 And, as a bitore bombleth in the myre,

She leyde hir mouth unto the water down:
 "Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,"

110

Quod she. "To thee I telle it, and namo:
 Myn housbond hath longe asses eres two!

Now is myn herte all hool, now is it oute;
 I mighte no lenger kepe it, out of doute."

Heer may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde,
 Yet out it moot, we can no conseil hyde.

The remenant of the tale if ye wol here,
 Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it lere.

This knight, of which my tale is specially,
 Whan that he saugh he mighte nat come thery—

This is to seye, what wommen loven moost—
 Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost;

But hoorn he gooth, he mighte nat sojourn:
 The day was come that hoornward mooste he tourne.

And in his wey it happed him to ryde,
 In al this care, under a forest syde,

Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
 Of ladies foure and twenty and yet mo;

Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
 In hope that som wisdom sholde he lerne.
 But certeinly, er he came fully there,

He loved her most, and also trusted her;
 he prayed her not to tell anyone
 of his disfigurement.

105

She swore to him that not for all the world
 would she do such villainy and sin

as to give her husband so bad a name;
 out of her own shame she wouldn't tell it.

But nonetheless she thought that she would die
 for having to keep a secret so long;

it seemed to her that her heart swelled so painfully
 some word must needs burst from her;

and since she dared not tell it to anybody,
 she ran down to a marsh close by—

her heart was on fire until she got there—
 and, as a bittern booms in the mire,

she laid her mouth down to the water:
 "Betray me not, you water, with your sound,"

110

said she. "To you I tell it, and to no one else:
 my husband has two long ass's ears!

Now my heart is all cured, for the secret is out!
 I simply couldn't keep it any longer."

In this you can see that though we wait a time,
 yet out it must come: we cannot hide a secret.

If you wish to hear the rest of the tale,
 read Ovid, and there you can learn of it.

When this knight whom my tale specially concerns
 saw that he couldn't come by it—

that is to say, what women love moost—
 his spirit was very sorrowful within his breast;

but home he went, he might not linger:
 the day was come when he must turn homeward.

And on his way, burdened with care, he happened
 to ride by the edge of a forest,

where he saw more than twenty-four
 ladies moving in a dance;

he drew eagerly toward that dance
 in the hope that he might learn something.
 But indeed, before he quite got there,

He loved hir most, and trusted hir also;
 He preyede hir, that to no creature
 She sholde tellen of his disfigure.

105

She swoor him nay, for al this world to winne,
 She nolde do that vileinye or sinne

To make hir housbond han so foul a name;
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 That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde;

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 But certeinly, er he came fully there,

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105

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 the day was come when he must turn homeward.

And on his way, burdened with care, he happened
 to ride by the edge of a forest,

where he saw more than twenty-four
 ladies moving in a dance;

he drew eagerly toward that dance
 in the hope that he might learn something.
 But indeed, before he quite got there,

Vanished was this daunce, he niste where.

140

No creature saugh he that bar lyf,

Save on the grene he saugh sitinge a wyf;

A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.

Agayn the knight this olde wyf gan ryse

And seyde, "Sir knight, heer forth ne lyth no wey.

145

Tel me what that ye seken, by your fey.

Parventure it may the bettre be;

Thise olde folk can muchel thing," quod she.

"My leve mooder," quod this knight, "certeyn,

I nam but deed, but if that I can seyn

What thing it is that women most desyre;

Coude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quyte your hyre."

150

"Plight me thy trouthe, heer in myn hand," quod she,

"The nexte thing that I requere thee,

Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy might;

And I wol tell it yow er it be night."

155

"Have here my trouthe," quod the knight. "I grante."

"Thanne," quod she, "I dar me wel avanté

Thy lyf is sauf, for I wol stonde therby,

Upon my lyf, the queen wol seye as I.

160

Lat see which is the proudeste of hem alle

That wereth on a coverchief or a calle

That dar seye nay of that I shal thee teche;

Lat us go forth withouten lenger speche."

Tho rouned she a pistel in his ere,

165

And bad him to be glad, and have no fere.

Whan they be comen to the court, this knight

Seyde he had holde his day, as he hadde night,

And redy was his answer, as he sayde.

Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,

And many a widwe, for that they ben wyse,

170

The queene hirself sitinge as a justyse,

Assembled been, his answer for to here;

And afterward this knight was bode appere.

To every wight commanded was silence,

175

And that the knight sholde telle in audience

What thing that worldly women loven best.

the dancers vanished, he knew not where.

140

He saw no living creature,

except a woman sitting on the green:

no one could imagine an uglier creature.

This old woman rose before the knight

and said, "Sir knight, no road lies this way.

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Tell me, by your faith, what you seek for.

Perhaps it may be the better;

these old folks know many things," said she.

"Dear mother," said this knight, "certainly

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I am as good as dead unless I can say

what thing it is that women most desire;

if you could tell me, I would repay your trouble well."

"Give me your promise, here upon my hand," said she,

"that you will do the next thing I require

of you, if it lies in your power,

155

and I will tell it to you before nightfall."

"Here is my promise," said the knight, "I grant it."

"Then," said she, "I dare to boast

that your life is safe, for I'll swear

upon my life that the queen will say as I do.

160

Let's see whether the proudest of all those

that wear a coverchief or headress

dares deny what I shall teach you;

let's go on without any more talk."

165

Then she whispered a message in his ear,

and told him to be glad and not afraid.

When they had come to the court, this knight

said he had kept his day as he had promised,

and his answer, he said, was ready.

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Many a noble wife and many a maiden,

and many a widow (since widows are so wise),

were assembled to hear his answer

with the queen herself sitting as judge;

and then the knight was ordered to appear.

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Everyone was commanded to keep silence,

and the knight was commanded to tell in open assembly

what thing it is that secular women love best.

This knight ne stood nat stille as doth a best,
But to his questoun anon answerde
With manly voys, that al the court it herde:

180

"My lige lady, generally," quod he,
"Wommen desyren to have sovereignty
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie him above;
This is your moste desyr, thogh ye me kille,
Doth as yow list, I am heer at your wille."

185

In al the court ne was ther wyf ne mayde
Ne widwe that contraried that he sayde,
But seyden he was worthy han his lyf.

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And with that word up sterte the olde wylf,
"Which that the knight saugh sittinge in the grene:
"Mercy," quod she, "my sovereignty lady queene!
Er that your court departe, do me right.

I taughte this answer unto the knight;
For which he plighte me his trouthe there,
The frste thing I wolde of him requere,
He wolde it do, if it lay in his might.

195

Bifore the court than preye I thee, sir knight,"
Quod she, "that thou me take unto thy wylf,
For wel thou wost that I have kept thy lyf.
If I sey fals, sey nay, upon thy fay."

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This knight answered, "Alas and weylawey!
I woot right wel that swich was my blieste.
For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste;
Tak al my good, and lat my body go."

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"Nay than," quod she, "I shrewe us bothe two!
For thogh that I be foul and old and pore,
I nolde for al the metal, ne for ore,
That under erthe is grave, or lyth above,
But if thy wylf I were and eek thy love."

210

"My love?" quod he; "Nay, my dampnacioun!
Allas, that any of my nacioun
Sholde ever so foule disparaged be!"
But al for noht, the ende is this, that he
Constreyned was, he nedes moste hir wedde;

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This knight did not stand in beastlike silence,
but answered to his question at once
with manly voice, so that all the court heard it:

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"My liege lady," he said, "generally
women desire to have dominion
over their husbands as well as their lovers,
and to be above them in mastery;
this is your greatest desire, though you may kill me;
do as you please, I am at your will here."

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In all the court there was neither wife nor maiden
nor widow who contradicted what he said,
but all said he deserved to have his life.

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And at that word up jumped the old woman
whom the knight had seen sitting on the green:
"Mercy," said she, "my sovereign lady queene!
Before your court depart, do right by me,
I taught this answer to the knight;
for this he gave me his promise there
that he would do the first thing

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I required of him, if it lay in his power.
Before the court, then, I pray you, sir knight,"
said she, "to take me as your wife;
for well you know that I have saved your life.
If I say false, deny me, on your faith!"

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The knight answered, "Alas and woe is me!
I know quite well that such was my promise.
For the love of God ask for something else;
take all my property and let my body go."

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"No then," said she. "Curse the two of us!
For though I am ugly and old and poor,
I wouldn't want all the metal or ore
that is buried under the earth or lies above
unless I were your wife and your love as well."

210

"My love?" said he; "No, my damnation!
Alas, that any of my birth
should ever be so foully disgraced!"
But it was all for nothing: the end was this, that he
was forced to accept the fact that he must needs wed her.

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And taketh his olde wyf and gooth to bedde.

Now wolden som men seye, paraventure,
That for my negligence I do no cure

To tellen yow the joye and al th'array
That at the feste was that ilke day.

To whiche thing shortly answerē I shal;
I seye ther nas no joye ne feste at al,

Ther nas but hevynesse and mucche sorwe;
For prively he wedded hir on the morwe,

And al day after hidde him as an oule—
So wo was him, his wyf looked so foule.

Greet was the wo the knight hadde in his thought,
Whan he was with his wyf abedde y-brought;

He walweth, and he turneth to and fro.
His olde wyf lay smylinge evermo,

And seyde, "O dere housbond, *ben cite!*
Fareth every knight thus with his wyf as ye?

Is this the lawe of King Arthures hous?
Is every knight of his so dangerous?

I am your owene love and eek your wyf;
I am she which that saved hath your lyf;

And certes, yet dide I yow never unright.
Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?

Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit.
What is my gilt? for Goddes love, tel me it,
And it shal been amended, if I may."

"Amended?" quod this knight, "Alas, nay, nay!
It wol nat been amended never mo!

Thou art so loothly and so old also,
And therto comen of so lowe a kinde,

That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and winde.
So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!"

"Is this," quod she, "the cause of your unreste?"
"Ye, certainly," quod he, "no wonder is."

"Now, sire," quod she, "I coude amende al this,
If that me liste, er it were dayes three,

So wel ye mighte bere yow unto me.
"But for ye speken of swich gentillesse

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and he took his old wife and went to bed.

Now some people might say, perhaps,
that out of negligence I am not bothering

to tell you about the joy and the pomp
at the feast that day,

to which objection I shall answer briefly:
I am telling you that there was no joy or feast at all,

there was nothing but gloom and much sorrow;
for he married her privately in the morning

and afterward hid himself like an owl all day—
he was so dejected because his wife looked so ugly.

Great was the woe in the knight's mind
when he was brought with his wife to bed;

he tossed and he turned to and fro.
His old wife lay smiling all the time,

and said, "O dear husband, bless my soul!
Does every knight behave with his wife as you do?

Is this the law of King Arthur's house?
Is every one of his knights so cold?

I am your own love and your wife;
I am she who saved your life;

and certainly I never yet did wrong to you.
Why do you act thus with me the first night?

You act like a man who has lost his mind.
What am I guilty of? For God's sake, tell me,
and it shall be corrected, if I can manage it."

"Corrected?" said this knight, "Alas, no, no!
It will never be corrected!

You are so loathsome and so old,
and what is more, of such low birth,

that it is little wonder if I toss and turn.
I wish to God my heart would break!"

"Is this," said she, "the cause of your unrest?"
"Yes, certainly," said he, "it's no wonder."

"Now, sir," said she, "I could rectify all this,
if I wanted to, before three days were up,

if you behaved yourself to me well.
"But in the matter of your speaking of such nobility

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the

As is descended out of old richesse,
That therfore sholden ye be gentil men,
Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.

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Loke who that is most vertuous alway,
Privee and apert, and most entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he can,

260

And tak him for the grettest gentil man.
Crist wol we clayme of him our gentillesse,
Nat of our eldres for hir old richesse:

For togh they yeve us al hir heritage,
For which we clayme to been of heigh parage,
Yet may they nat biquette for nothing

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To noon of us hir vertuous living,
That made hem gentil men y-called be;
And bad us folwen hem in swich degree.

“Wel can the wyse poete of Florence,

That highte Dant * spoken in this sentence;
Lo in swich maner rym is Dantes tale:

270

‘Ful selde up ryseth by his branches smale
Prowesse of man; for God, of his goodnesse,
Wol that of him we clayme our gentillesse.’

275

For of our eldres may we nothing clayme
But temporel thing, that man may hurte and mayme.
Eek every wight wot this as wel as I;
If gentillesse were planted naturelly

Unto a certeyn linage, down the lynes,

Privee and apert, than wolde they never fyne

280

To doon of gentillesse the faire offyce;
They mighte do no velleinye or vyce.

“Tak fyr, and ber it in the derkeste hous
Bitwix this and the Mount of Caucasus,*

And lat men shette the dores and go thenne;
Yet wol the fyr as faire lye and brenne

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As twenty thousand men mighte it biholde;
His office naturel ay wol it holde,
Up peril of my lyf, til that it dye.

“Heer may ye see wel how that genterye

290

as descends from ancient wealth,
claiming that because of it you are supposed to be
noblemen—such arrogance is not worth a hen.

255

Find the man who is always the most virtuous,
privately and publicly, and who always tries hardest
to do what noble deeds he can,

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and consider him the greatest nobleman.
Christ wants us to claim our nobility from him,
not from our ancestors because of their ancient wealth:
for though they give us all their heritage,

on the strength of which we claim to be of noble descent,
yet they cannot bequeath by any means

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or to any of us their virtuous manner of life
which made them be called noblemen;
and which summoned us to follow them at the

same level.

“Well can the wise poet of Florence
who is called Dante speak on this subject;
in this sort of rhyme is Dante's tale:

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‘Not oft by branches of a family tree
Does human prowess rise; for gracious God
Wants us to claim from him nobility.’

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For from our elders we may claim nothing
but perishable matter, to which man may do hurt and
injury. And everyone knows as well as I that
if nobility were implanted by nature

in a certain lineage, down the line of descent,
they would never cease, in private or public,
to do the fair offices of nobility;

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they could do nothing shameful or evil.

“Take fire, and bear it into the darkest house
from here to the Mount of Caucasus,
and let men shut the doors and go away;
yet the fire will blaze and burn as well

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as if twenty thousand men were looking at it;
it will maintain its natural function always
until it dies, I'll stake my life.

“By this you can easily see that nobility

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Is nat annexed to possession,
 Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun
 Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kinde.
 For, God it woot, men may wel offen finde
 A lordes sone do shame and vileinye;
 And he that wol han prys of his gentrye
 For he was boren of a gentil hous,
 And hadde hise eldres noble and vertuons,
 And nil himselfen do no gentil dedis,
 Ne folwe his gentil auncestre that deed is,
 He nis nat gentil, be he duk or earl;
 For vileyyns, sinful dedes make a cherl.
 For gentillesse nis but renomee
 Of thyne auncestres, for hir heigh bountee,
 Which is a strange thing to thy persone.
 Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone;
 Than comth our verray gentillessé of grace,
 It was no thing biquethe us with our place.
 "Thenketh how noble, as seith Valerius,*
 Was thilke Tullius Hostilius,*
 That out of povert roos to heigh noblesse.
 Redeth Senek,* and redeth eek Boece,*
 Ther shul ye seen expres that it no drede is
 That he is gentil that doth gentil dedis.
 And therefore, leve housbond, I thus conclude,
 Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
 Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
 Grante me grace to liven vertuously;
 Thanne am I gentli, whan that I biginne
 To liven vertuously and weyve sinne.
 "And theras ye of povert me repreve,
 The hye God, on whom that we believe,
 In wilful povert chees to live his lyf;
 And certes every man, mayden, or wyf
 May understonde that Jesus, hevene king,
 Ne wolde nat chese a vicious living.

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is not tied to possessions,
 since people do not perform their function
 without variation as does the fire, according to
 its nature.
 For God knows, men may very often find
 a lord's son committing shameful and vile deeds;
 and he who wishes to have credit for his nobility
 because he was born of a noble house,
 and because his elders were noble and virtuous,
 but will not himself do any noble deeds
 or follow the example of his late noble ancestor,
 he is not noble, be he duke or earl;
 for villainous, sinful deeds make him a churl.
 This kind of nobility is only the renown
 of your ancestors, earned by their great goodness,
 which is a thing apart from yourself.
 Your nobility comes from God alone;
 then our true nobility comes of grace,
 it was in no way bequeathed to us with our station
 in life.
 "Think how noble, as Valerius says,
 was that Tullius Hostilius
 who rose out of poverty to high nobility.
 Read Seneca, and read Boethius, too;
 there you shall see expressly that there is no doubt
 that he is noble who does noble deeds.
 And therefore, dear husband, I thus conclude
 that even if my ancestors were low,
 yet God on high may—and so I hope—
 grant me grace to live virtuously;
 then I am noble, from the time when I begin
 to live virtuously and avoid sin.
 "And as for the poverty you reprove me for,
 high God in whom we believe
 chose to live his life in willing poverty;
 and certainly every man, maiden, or wife
 can understand that Jesus, heaven's king,
 would not choose a vicious way of life.

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Glad povert is an honest thing, certeyn;
 This wol Senek and othere clerkes seyn.
 Whoso that halt him payd of his poverte,
 I holde him riche, al hadde he nat a sherte,
 He that covyerteth is a povre wight,
 For he wolde han that is nat in his might.
 But he that nocht hath, ne covyerteth have,
 Is riche, although ye holde him but a knave.

"Verray povert, it singeth proprely;
 Juvenal* seith of povert, 'Merrily

The povre man, whan he goth by the weye,
 Bifore the theves he may singe and pleye,
 Povert is hateful good, and, as I geese,
 A ful greet bringer out of bisnesse;

A greet amender eek of sapience
 To him that taketh it in pacience.

Povert is this, although it seme elenge:
 Possessioun, that no wight wol chalenge.
 Povert ful offe, whan a man is lowe,

Maketh his God and eek himself to knowe,
 Povert a spectacle is, as thinketh me,
 Thurgh which he may his verray frendes see.

And therefore, sire, sin that I nocht yow greve,
 Of my povert namore ye me repreve.

"Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;
 And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee
 Were in no book, ye gentils of honour

Seyn that men sholde an old wight doon favour,
 And clepe him fader, for your gentilnesse;
 And auctours shal I finden, as I gesse.

"Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old,
 Than drede you nocht to been a cokewold;
 For fithe and elde, also mote I thee,
 Been grete wardeyns upon chasitee.
 But natheles, sin I knowe your delyt,
 I shal fulfille your worldly appetyt.

Contented poverty is an honorable thing, indeed;
 this is said by Seneca and other learned men.

Whoever is content with his poverty
 I hold to be rich, even if he hasn't a shirt.

He who covets anything is a poor man,
 for he wants to have something which is not in
 his power.

But he who has nothing and desires nothing is rich,
 although you may consider him nothing but a
 lowly man.

"True poverty sings of its own accord;
 Juvenal says of poverty, 'Merrily can
 the poor man sing and joke before the
 thieves when he goes by the road.'

Poverty is a good that is hated, and, I guess,
 a great expeller of cares;
 a great amender of knowledge, too,
 to him that takes it in pacience.

Poverty is this, although it seem unhealthy:
 possession of that which no man will challenge.
 Poverty will often, when a man is low,
 make him know his God and himself as well.

Poverty is a glass, it seems to me,
 through which he can see his true friends.
 And therefore, sir, since I do not harm you by it,
 do not reprove me for my poverty anymore.

"Now, sir, you reprove me for age;
 but certainly, sir, aside from bookish
 authority, you nobles who are honorable
 say that one should honor an old person,
 and call him father, for the sake of your nobility;
 and I can find authors to that effect, I imagine.

"Now as to the point that I am ugly and old—
 then you need not dread being a cuckold;
 for ugliness and age, as I may thrive,
 are great wardens of chastity.
 But nevertheless, since I know what pleases you,
 I shall fulfill your fleshly appetite.

"Chees now," quod she, "oon of thise thinges tweye:
To han me foul and old til that I deye,

And be to yow a trewe humble wyf,
And never yow displese in al my lyf,

Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
And take your aventure of the repair

That shal be to your hous, by cause of me,
Or in som other place, may wel be.

Now chees yourselfen, whether that yow lyketh."

This knight avyseth him and sore syketh,

But atte laste he seyde in this manere,

"My lady and my love, and wyf so dere,

I put me in your wyse governance;

Cheseth yourself which may be most plesance,

And most honour to yow and me also.

I do no fors the whether of the two;

For as yow lyketh, it suffieth me."

"Thanne have I gete of yow maistrye," quod she,

"Sin I may chese, and governe as me les?"

"Ye certes, wyf," quod he, "I holde it best."

"Kis me," quod she, "we be no lenger wrotte;

For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe;

This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.

I prey to God that I mot sterven wood

But I to yow be al so good and trewe

As ever was wyf sin that the world was newe.

And, but I be tomorn as fair to sene

As any lady, emperyce or queene

That is bitwixe the est and eke the west,

Doth with my lyf and deeth right as yow lest,

Cast up the curtin, loke how that it is."

And whan the knight saugh verrailly al this,

That she so fair was, and so yong therto,

For joye he hente hir in his armes two,

His herte bathed in a bath of blisse;

A thousand tyme arewe he gan hir kisse.

And she obeyed him in every thing

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"Choose now," said she, "one of these two things:
to have me ugly and old until I die,

and be a faithful, humble wife to you,

and never displease you in all my life;

or else to have me young and fair,

and take your chances on the flocking

of people to your house because of me—

or to some other place, it may well be.

Now choose yourself, whichever you like."

The knight considered and sighed sorely,

but at last he spoke in this manner,

"My lady and my love, and wife so dear,

I put myself under your wise controul;

you yourself choose which may be most pleasurable

and most honorable to you and to me also.

I don't care which of the two I get;

for whatever pleases you suffices for me."

"Then have I got mastery over you," said she,

"since I may choose and rule as I please?"

"Yes, certainly, wife," said he, "I consider that best."

"Kiss me," said she, "we won't be angry anymore;

for I swear I will be both these things to you;

that is to say, both fair indeed and good.

I pray to God that I may die mad

if I am not just as good and true to you

as ever was wife since the world began.

And, if I am not tomorrow as fair to see

as any lady, empress, or queene

between the east and the west,

do with the question of my life and death just as

you wish.

Raise the curtain, and see how it is."

And when the knight actually saw all this—

that she was so fair and so young, too,

he seized her in his two arms for joy,

his heart was bathed in bliss;

he kissed her a thousand times in a row.

And she obeyed him in everything

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358 THE WIFE OF BATH

That mighte doon him plesance or lykynge.
And thus they live, unto hir lyves ende,
In parfit joye; and Jesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meke, yonge, and fresshe abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde.
And eek I preye Jesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nigardes of dispenche,
God sende hem sone verray pestilence!

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THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

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that might give him pleasure or joy.
And thus they lived to the end of their lives
in perfect joy; and Jesus Christ send us
husbands who are meek, young, and lively in bed,
and grace to outlive those that we marry.
And also I pray Jesus to shorten the lives
of those that won't be governed by their wives;
and as for old and angry niggards with their money,
God send them soon a true pestilence.

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