

Geoffrey Chaucer
 Excerpts from *The Canterbury Tales*
 Translation by Ken Eckert



The Canterbury Tales were written in England around 1386 by Geoffrey Chaucer. The series of poems is about a group of people traveling together on a tour from London to visit religious sites in the city of Canterbury. To pass the time as they ride, they decide to tell stories.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zepherus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blissful martir for to seke,
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
 Bifil that in that seson on a day,
 In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
 Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
 To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
 At nyght was come into that hostelrye
 Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
 Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
 In felawshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
 That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
 The chambres and the stables weren wyde,
 And wel we weren esed atte beste.
 And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
 So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
 That I was of hir felawshipe anon,
 And made forward erly for to ryse,
 To take oure wey ther as I yow devyse.

When April, with its sweet showers,
 Has pierced the dryness of March to its roots,
 And bathed every stem in the liquid
 Which will show its qualities in the flower;
 When Zephyrus as well with his sweet breath
 Stirs up in every meadow and field
 The new crops; when the young sun
 Has run halfway through the sign of Taurus;
 When small birds begin to make songs,
 Who sleep all the night with open eyes,
 As Nature moves them in their hearts—
 It's then that folks long to go on pilgrimages,
 And for the faithful to seek unknown shores,
 To faraway places only familiar in other lands.
 And so in particular, from every town's end
 Of England to Canterbury they go,
 To find the holy blissful martyr
 Who helped them when they were sick.
 It so happened that in that season one day,
 As I was staying in Southwark at the Tabard,
 Ready to set out on my pilgrimage
 To Canterbury with a devout heart,
 That night in that inn
 Came a good twenty-nine people together,
 Of various people, brought together by chance
 Into fellowship, and all of them pilgrims,
 Who were to ride together to Canterbury.
 The rooms and the stables were spacious,
 And we were well taken care of;
 And soon, when the sun had set,
 I had talked with each one of them,
 So that I was quickly in their friendship.
 We made our promises to rise early
 To make our way there, as I'll tell you.

The Miller's Tale



One of the most famous of the tales (although it's pretty risqué) is a story told by the Miller. Here is a sample of the original English from the time period, followed by a translation.

Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford
 A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord
 And of his craft he was a carpenter
 With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler
 Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye
 Was turned for to lerne astrologye
 And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns
 To demen by interrogaciouns
 If that men asked hym, in certein houres
 Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures
 Or if men asked hym what sholde bifalle
 Of every thyng; I may nat rekene hem alle

Once upon a time at Oxford there lived
 A rich commoner who boarded guests,
 Who was a carpenter by craft.
 With him lived a poor scholar
 Who had studied the liberal arts, but all
 Of his interests had turned to astrology.
 He could reach certain conclusions
 And solve problems by determinations,
 If men asked him at what time
 There might be droughts or rain,
 Or if men asked him what might happen in
 any matter—I couldn't tell you them all.

Here follow the words between the Host and the Miller.

When the Knight had finished his story, there was no one in all of the crowd, young or old, who denied that it was a noble story and worthy to be remembered, especially among the gentlemen and ladies. Our Host laughed and exclaimed, "As I live or die, this is going fine! The bag is unbuckled. Now let's see who will tell another story, for the game has started well. Now you, Sir Monk, if you can, tell us something to answer the Knight's tale."

Meanwhile, the Miller, who was so drunk that he was pale, so that he could hardly stay on his horse, did not wait to remove either hood or hat, and would not wait for any man's courtesy, but began to yell in a voice like Pilate's, and swore, "By my arms and blood and bones, I know a

fine tale for the occasion, which I'll use to answer the Knight's tale!"

Our Host saw that he was drunk with beer and said, "Wait a while, Robin, dear brother—some better man should tell us another one first. Hold off, and let us spend our time better."

"By God's soul!" he shouted, "I won't do it! I will either speak or else go my way!"
 Our Host sighed, "Go on, in the name of the Devil. You are a fool; you've lost your wits."

"Now listen," said the Miller, "one and all. But first I'll make an admission that I'm drunk. I know it by my voice. And therefore, if I speak badly, blame it on the beer of Southwark, I ask you. For I'll tell you a legend and life, both of a carpenter and his wife, and how a clerk made a fool of the carpenter."

The Reeve answered and said, “Stop your nonsense. Let your vulgar drunken stories be. It is a sin and great foolishness to insult or injure any man, or to bring wives into such shame. You could tell plenty of stories about other matters.”

The drunken Miller retorted quickly and said, “Oswald, dear brother, whoever has no wife is no cuckold. But that doesn’t mean I say that you are cheated; there are many good wives, and always a thousand good ones for every one bad. You know that yourself, if you’re not crazy. Why are you angry with my tale already? I have a wife, by God, as well as you do—yet I wouldn’t take it upon myself, for all the cows in my shed, to know that I was cheated. I would rather believe that I’m not! A husband shouldn’t be too curious about God’s mysteries, nor about his own wife. He can find God’s plenty there; he need not worry about the rest!”

What should I add more except that this Miller would not stop his speech for any man, but told his vulgar story in his own way. It’s my plan to retell it here. And therefore I ask every gentle creature, for God’s love, not to think that I tell it for bad purposes, but only because I must tell all of the tales, for better or worse, or else fail in my task. And thus, whoever would rather not hear it, turn over the page and choose another tale. For he will find enough, great and small, of stories about noble deeds, and about morality and holiness as well. Do not blame me if you choose wrongly! The Miller is an oaf—you know this well. So was the Reeve as well, and many others, and the two of them spoke about dirty stories. Be warned, and do not blame me. People should not take seriously what’s meant to be in fun!

Here begins the Miller’s Tale.

Once there was a rich peasant who lived in Oxford and ran a boarding house. By craft he was a carpenter, and with him resided a poor scholar. He had majored in the arts, but all of his interest had turned to learning astrology. He could reach certain conclusions and solve problems by interrogations, if men asked him at what time there might be drought or rain, or if men asked him what might happen in any matter—I couldn’t tell you them all.

This clerk was called handsome Nicolas. He knew all about secret loves and their pleasures, and so he was subtle and very discreet, and like a timid maiden in appearance. He had a room in that boarding house on his own, without any company, well-decorated with sweet herbs, and he himself was as sweet as the root of licorice or ginger.

His Ptolemy texts, his books both great and small, his astrolabe, which belonged to his arts, and his divining stones were laid out neatly on shelves near his bed’s head. His clothes-press was covered with a red woolen cloth, and above all lay a gay harp, on which he played melodies at night, so sweetly that all the room rang.

He would sing “The Angel to the Virgin,” and after that he would sing “The King’s Note.” Very often his merry throat was blessed! And so this sweet student spent his time, on his own income and with the help of friends.

The carpenter had recently married a wife, who he loved more than his own life; she was eighteen years old. He was jealous of her, and held her in a narrow cage, for she was wild and young, and he was old, and worried that he would become a cuckold. He didn’t know any Cato—for his education was simple—who told men that like should marry like. Men should marry their own type, for young and old are often in conflict. But since he had fallen into the snare, he must endure his worries like other people do.

This young wife was beautiful, and a body like a weasel’s, slim and small. She wore a belt with bars of silk, and an apron as well, as white as morning milk, and on her thighs she had many fine clothes. Her shirt was white, and embroidered in the front and behind as well. Her collar was made of coal-black silk, both inside and outside as well. The ribbons on her white cap were the same color as her collar. Her wide headband was silk, and set high. And for a fact, she had a horny eye!

Her eyebrows were daintily plucked, and they were angled and as dark as any blackberry. She was more pleasing to look at than a newly budding pear tree, and softer than the wool on sheep. And from her girdle hung a purse of leather, tasseled with silk and finished with metal.

In all this world, if one looked up and down, there is no man so wise who could imagine so bright a lass or such a fine girl! The glow of her face shone brighter than a gold coin minted newly in the Tower. And about her singing, it was as strong and lively as any swallow sitting on a barn.

Along with this she could dance and have fun, as much as any kid or calf following its mother. Her mouth was as sweet as a honey drink, or a hoard of apples laid in the hay or a meadow. She was attractive, like a jolly colt, as tall as a ship's mast, and as straight up as a bolt. She wore a brooch on her low collar, as broad as the engraving on a shield. Her shoes were laced high on her legs. She was a young rose, a little pig's tail, for any lord to lay in his bed, or for any good laborer to wed!

Now again, people, it so happened that one day this handsome Nicolas fell into flirting and playing with this young wife while her husband was in Osney—since clerks are very subtle and sly. He grabbed her intimately between her legs and said, "For sure, unless I have my way, lover, my heart will spill from my secret love for you!" He held her tightly by her thighs and said, "Lover, love me right now, or I will die, so help me God!"

She sprang away like a colt does in a stall, and turned her head away fast, and shouted, "I will not kiss you, by my faith! Why, leave me alone!" she said. "Go away, Nicolas, or I will scream 'Hey, help!' and 'Alas!' Take away your hands, for your own honor!"

Then Nicolas cried for forgiveness, and spoke so beautifully and convincingly, that she gave him her love at last, and swore an oath by Saint Thomas of Kent that she would obey his will when she could find opportunity to do so.

"My husband is so full of jealousy that unless you are patient and discreet, I know for sure that I am as good as dead," she said. "You must be very secretive in this." "Oh, no, have no worries about it," answered Nicolas. "A clerk would have wasted his studies if he couldn't fool a carpenter!"

And so they were in agreement to wait for a time, as I've spoken before. When Nicolas had

done such things, he felt her well below the waist, kissed her sweetly, and took his harp and played vigorously, making a melody.

Then it so happened on a holy day that this good wife went to the parish church to do Christ's own work. Her forehead shone as bright as any day, for it was washed when she stopped her work.

Now in that church there was a parish clerk, who went by the name Absalom. His hair was curled, and shone like gold, and spread out like fan, long and broad—his hair's part laid completely straight and even. His complexion was red with his eyes as grey as a goose. With St. Paul's window carved on his shoes, he walked prettily in red stockings. He was dressed daintily and properly in a tunic of a light blue, with lacings set finely and thickly. And over that he wore a gay hood, as white as the blossom on a branch.

He was a merry child, so help me God! He knew well how to let blood or how to clip hair and shave, and to make a contract of land or a deed. In twenty ways he could skip and dance, after the fashions of Oxford then, and with his legs he could kick to and fro, and play songs on a small lute.

He could just as well play on a guitar, and in all the town there wasn't a brew house or tavern that he didn't visit to liven up, wherever there was a jolly barmaid. But to tell the truth, he was squeamish about some things, such as passing wind, and was fastidious in his speech.

This Absalom, who was so jolly and lively, goes around with burning incense on the holidays, vigorously blessing the women of the church and casting many a lovely look on them, and especially on this carpenter's wife. He thought it was a merry life to look on her, for she was so proper and sweet and lusty. I dare to say, if she had been a mouse and he a cat, he would have seized her at once. This parish clerk, this jolly Absalom, had such lovesickness in his heart that he did not bother to take offerings from any wives; for courtesy, he said, he didn't want any.

When it was night, the moon shone brightly, and Absalom took his guitar, planning to stay up late for lovemaking. Forth he went, jolly and amorous, until he came to the carpenter's house,

a little after the roosters had crowed, and placed himself by a small window that was part of the carpenter's wall. He sang in his high, delicate voice, "Now, dear lady, if you will, I beg of you that you will think on me," accompanied finely by his guitar.

The carpenter woke up and heard him singing, and called to his wife, saying at once, "Alison, wake up! Isn't that Absalom, who's singing like that under our bedroom wall?" And to that she answered her husband, "Yes, God knows, John, I hear every bit of it."

This went on; what more do you need to know? From day to day this jolly Absalom courted her so much that he was lost in love. He stayed up all the night and all the day; he combed his broad locks and made them pretty. He pursued her with gifts and messengers, and swore that he would be her servant. He sang, quavering like a nightingale; he sent her spiced wine, honeyed beer, and spiced ale, and wafer cakes, piping hot out of the oven. And since she knew city ways, he offered money—for some folks will be won by riches, and some by beatings, and some by gallantry.

At times, to show his agility and mastery, he played Herod upon a high stage. But what did it all help him in the matter? She loved this handsome Nicolas so much that Absalom could go blow a horn for all she cared. He got nothing for his labor but scorn. And so she made Absalom her ape, and turned all his earnestness into a joke.

The proverb is very true, it is no lie—men say it rightly: 'Someone who is always near someone sly will make a distant lover disliked.' It made no difference if Absalom was crazy or angry; because he was far out of sight, Nicolas stood in the way of his light. So bear yourself well, handsome Nicolas! For Absalom can wail and cry 'Alas!'

And so it happened one Saturday that the carpenter was gone to Osney, and handsome Nicolas and Alison agreed to a plan that Nicolas would develop some trick that would deceive the jealous, simple husband; and, if the trick came off right, she would sleep in his arms all night, for this was his desire and hers as well.

And right away, without more words, Nicolas would not wait longer but went secretly to his room carrying both food and drink for a day or two, and instructed Alison to tell her husband, if he asked about Nicolas, that she didn't know where he was. She said that she had not laid eyes on him all day and thought that he must be ill, for no matter how many times their maid called him, he would not answer the door for anything.

This went on all that Saturday, that Nicolas stayed quietly in his room, eating and sleeping, or doing as he wished, until Sunday when the sun went down to rest.

This stupid carpenter had great curiosity about Nicolas, or about what was ailing him, and said, "I am afraid, by Saint Thomas, that Nicolas is not well at all. God forbid that he should die suddenly! This world is not normal lately, surely. Today I saw a corpse being carried to church, that only last Monday I saw out working."

"Go up," he said to his servant at once. "Call at his door, or bang it with a rock. See what the matter is, and tell me straight out." The servant went up with courage, and stood at the bedroom door, crying and knocking as if he were crazy. "Hey! Hello! What are you doing, Master Nicolas? Why are you sleeping all day long?"

But it was all for nothing—he heard not one word. He spotted a hole, at the bottom of the door, a place where the cat could go in and out, and through that hole he peeped in, finally getting a look at him. Nicolas sat upright, continually gazing, as if hypnotized by the new moon. Down the servant went, telling his master at once how he had seen Nicolas.

The carpenter began to bless himself, and said "Help us, saints! Men know little about what can happen to them. This man has fallen, because of his astronomy, into some madness or some torment. I thought that something like this would happen. Men should not meddle into God's mysteries. Yes, blessed is the simple man who knows only his scriptures!"

"The same happened to another student with his astronomy; he walked out in the fields to gaze at the stars—what should happen but he fell into a pit, not seeing it! But still, by Saint Thomas, I feel sorry for handsome Nicolas. He will be

scolded for his studying if I may, by Jesus, heaven's king!"

"Get me a stick that I can pry with, Robin, while you heave up the door. That should bring him out of his trance, as I think."

And they moved toward the bedroom door. His servant was a strapping lad for the occasion, and he ripped the door off the hinges at once; it immediately fell to the floor. But Nicolas continually sat as still as a stone, and gazed upwards into the air. The carpenter thought that he was in despair, and took him firmly by the shoulders and shook him hard, and shouted anxiously, "Hey! Nicolas! Hey! Hello! Look down! Wake up, and think of Christ's sacrifice. I bless you from elves and evil creatures."

He then immediately began to recite a night-spell on the four walls of the room, and on the threshold of the door outside: "Oh, Jesus and Saint Benedict, protect this house against every wicked spirit, from the dark of night—the pure Lord's Prayer! Where are you, sister of Saint Peter?"

At last handsome Nicolas began to sigh painfully and cried, "Alas! Is all the world now to be lost?" The carpenter said, "What did you say? Now, think of your Lord, as all of us men who work do."

Nicolas answered, "Get me something to drink, and after then I will speak in private about certain things that concern you and me. I will reveal it to no one else, for sure."

The carpenter went down and came back, and brought a large bottle of strong ale. And when each of them had drunk his part, Nicolas shut and locked his door, and sat down by the carpenter. He said, "John, my dear and beloved host, you must swear to me by your faith that you will not reveal this to anyone, for it is Christ's prophecy that I say, and if you tell it to anyone you are lost; you will have His vengeance if you betray me and will go insane."

"No, may Christ forbid it, by His holy blood!" answered this naïve man, "I am no blabbermouth. Though I talk, I am no lover of gossip. Say what you wish, I will never tell it to child or wife, by He who conquered hell!"

"Then, John," said Nicolas, "I will not lie to you. I have discovered in my astrology, as I looked into the bright moon, that on the next Monday, in the first quarter of the night, there will fall a rain which is so wild and mad that Noah's flood wasn't half as great."

He continued, "The rain will be so hideous that this world, in less than an hour, will all be drowned. Thus mankind will be destroyed and all will lose their lives."

The carpenter exclaimed, "Alas, my wife! Will she drown as well? Alas, my Alison!" In his sorrow he nearly fell down, and he continued, "Is there nothing to be done in this matter?"

"Why, yes, by God," said handsome Nicolas, "If you will obey my teachings and reason. You must not follow your own inclinations—for as Solomon says, who was very wise: 'Work according to good advice and you will have no regrets.' And if you will work by my wise counsel, I promise that I will save her and you and me yet, without mast or sail. Have you not learned how Noah was saved, when our Lord warned him before that all the world would be lost in the waters?"

"Yes," said the carpenter, "long ago." "Have you not also learned," said Nicolas, "about the sorrows of Noah and his wife before he could get his wife onto the ship? He would have preferred, I dare to say, to have all his sheep turn black if she could have had a ship to herself. And therefore, do you know what's the best course to follow? This demands quick action, and in a crisis men should not preach or make delays."

"Right away, bring into this inn a bread-making trough, or else a tub, for each of us, and make sure that they are big, so that we may float in them like in a barge. And place inside enough provisions for one day—forget about the rest! The water will slacken and fall away in the morning of the next day."

"But Robin, your servant, must not know about this, nor your maid Jill either. I can't save them. Do not ask me why—even if you ask me, I will not reveal the mysteries of God. Let it be enough, even if it makes you crazy, to have as much grace as Noah had. I will save your wife, without a doubt."

“Now go your way, and do your business quickly. And when you have gotten us these three bread-tubs, for her and you and me, then you must hang them high from the ceiling, so that no man can learn about our preparations.

“And when you have done as I said, place our supplies squarely in them, along with an axe to cut the cords in two. And so that we may float when the water comes in, break a hole up in the roof, in the peak facing the garden and over the stable. In this way we may freely pass on our way when the great rain has stopped.”

“Then you will float as merrily as the white duck does following her husband. Then I will call, ‘Hello, Alison! Hello, John! Be happy, for the flood will pass quickly.’ And you will say, ‘Hey, Master Nicolas! Good morning. I see that you’re well, for it’s daylight.’ And then we will be like lords all our lives over all the world, as Noah and his wife were.”

“But I must warn you severely about one matter: Be very sure on that same night that when we enter into our ships, that none of us speak a single word, or call, or cry, but be in silent prayer. For it is God’s own dear will.”

“Your wife and you must hang far apart, so that there will be no sin between you, no more in lustful looks than in deeds. This prophecy has been spoken. Go, God speed you! Tomorrow night, when men are all asleep, we will creep into our bread-tubs and sit there, awaiting God’s grace. Now go your way—I have no more time to make a longer account of this. Men say, ‘Send the wise, and say nothing.’ You are so wise that no explanation should be needed. Go, save our lives, and I beg this of you.”

The foolish carpenter went on his way. Often he said ‘Alas’ and ‘Woe is us!’, and he revealed his knowledge to his wife. But she was aware, and knew better than he did, what all this strange business meant. Nonetheless she carried on as if she would die, and said, “Alas! Go right away and help us to escape, or we’ll be dead to the last one. I am your true and wedded wife; hurry, dear husband, and help to save our lives.” What a great thing self-deception is!

Impressions can be taken so seriously that men may die from their own imaginations. This

naïve carpenter began to quake with fear. He truly thought that he would see Noah’s flood come rushing in like the sea to drown Alison, his dear honey.

He wept, wailed, and made a grim face; he sighed with many a sorry breath. He hurried and found himself a bread-tub, and then a bathtub and a trough, and had them sent privately to his inn, and hung them from the ceiling in secrecy.

With his own hands he made three ladders, to climb by the rungs and the steps into the tubs hanging from the beams, and provisioned them, both trough and tubs, with bread and cheese and jugs of good ale, a supply well-sufficient for one day. But before he had made all this preparation, he sent his servant and his maid as well to London to fulfill his needs.

On that Monday, when it drew toward night, he shut up his door, and without candle-light he prepared everything as it ought to be. And shortly after, all three of them climbed up and laid still for a while.

“Now, quietly, say the Lord’s Prayer,” said Nicolas, and “Quietly,” said John, and “Quietly,” said Alison.

The carpenter said his devotions, and laid still and said his prayers, waiting for the rain if he could hear it. As I guess from all his busy work, sleepiness fell heavily on the carpenter, about curfew-time or a little later.

From all his soul’s worries he groaned sorely and soon began to snore, for his head lay crooked. Down the ladder crept Nicolas, and Alison hurried softly down as well. Without more words they went to bed, where the carpenter usually slept. Then there was joy and melody! And thus smooth Alison and Nicolas engaged in the business of fun and pleasure, until the morning bells of church lauds began to ring, and the friars in the cells began to sing.

The parish clerk, this amorous Absalom, who was always so lost in love, was in Osney that Monday with some companions to have fun and pass time with.

By chance he asked a church clerk discreetly about John the carpenter, and the clerk drew him out of the church and said, “I don’t know. I

haven't seen him at work since Saturday. I assume he has gone to get wood and that our abbot sent him, for he often goes for timber and stays at the farm a day or two—or else he is at home, for sure. Where he is, I can't say for sure."

Then Absalom was jolly and light of heart, and thought, "Now's the time to stay up all night, for I'm sure I did not see him stirring around his door since the break of day. As I live and breathe, when the roosters crow I will quietly knock at the window which stands below his bedroom wall."

"Then I'll reveal all my lovesickness to Alison, for I can't fail at least to kiss her! I will get some form of relief, by my faith. My mouth has been itching all day long—that is a sign of kissing, at the least. Therefore, I'll go sleep an hour or two, and then all night long I'll stay up and enjoy myself."

When the first rooster had crowed then Absalom, the jolly lover, rose up and dressed himself prettily to perfection. But first he chewed grain and licorice for sweet breath before he had combed his hair. Under his tongue he put fresh herbs, for with them he hoped to seem gracious.

He roamed to the carpenter's house, and stood silently under the small window—it was so low that it came up to his chest—and coughed softly with a delicate voice: "Where are you, honey-comb, sweet Alison, my fair bird, my sweet cinnamon? Wake up, lover, and talk to me! You do not think at all about my torment, that I suffer for your love wherever I go. I yearn like a lamb for its mother. For sure, lover, I have such heartsickness that I moon like a turtledove and eat like a maid."

"Get away from the window, you Jack fool!" she said. "So help me God, there will be no 'Come kiss me' nonsense! I love someone else—or else I would deserve blame—better than you, by Jesus, Absalom. Get on your way or I'll throw out the bed-stone, and let me sleep, in the name of twenty devils!"

"Alas!", said Absalom, "Alas, that true love was ever treated so badly! Then kiss me, since it cannot be otherwise, and for love for me."

"Will you go your way then?" she said.

"Yes, for sure, lover," answered Absalom.

Then she whispered to Nicolas, "Now hush, and you'll get your fill of laughter." Absalom set himself down on his knees and said, "I am a lord in every respect. For after this, I hope more will come—Lover, your graciousness, and sweet bird, your mercy!"

She opened the window, and in a hurry. "Get it over with," she said, "Come on, and do it fast, before our neighbors see you."

Absalom began to wipe his mouth dry. The night was as dark as pitch, or as coal—and out of the window she stuck her bum—and Absalom, who knew no better or worse, kissed her naked arse with his mouth, savoring the kiss before he knew what it was. He jumped back, thinking something was wrong, for he knew well that women do not have beards. He felt something rough and long-haired, and said, "What? Alas? What have I done?"

"Tee hee!" she said, and slammed the window shut, and Absalom went forth on his sad way. "A joke! A joke!" said handsome Nicolas. "By God's bones, that was beautiful!"

This innocent Absalom heard every bit, and began to bite his lip in anger, saying to himself, "I will get my revenge on you." Who now rubs, who scrubs his lips, with dirt, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with wood-chips, but Absalom, who continually cries, "Alas!"

"My soul I commit to Satan! I would rather avenge this shame than have the whole town!" he said. "Alas, that I didn't turn away." His hot love was now cold and all extinguished, for from that moment that he kissed her arse, he did not give a damn about romance—he was cured of his lovesickness. He continually cursed romance, and wept like a beaten child.

He passed quietly over the streets to a blacksmith called Master Gervais, who made plows in his forge and sharpened shares and plow-blades busily. Absalom knocked very softly, and said, "Open up, Gervais, and quickly."

"What, who is it?"
"It's me, Absalom."

“Why, Absalom! For Christ’s sweet cross, why are you up so early. Ah, forgive us all! Some merry lass, God knows who, has brought you here in the night. By Saint Note, you know exactly what I mean!”

Absalom didn’t care a bean for his jokes; he did not say a word. He had bigger fish to fry than what Gervais knew, and said, “Dear friend, that hot plow-blade in the chimney fire there, lend it to me—I have something to do with it, and I will bring it back to you right away.”

Gervais answered, “For sure, even if it were gold, or in a bag of uncounted silver you would have it, as sure as I’m a true blacksmith!”

“With that,” said Absalom, “leave it be for now. I will tell you everything tomorrow afternoon.” And he took the blade by the cold steel handle. He crept silently out the door and went toward the carpenter’s wall. He coughed first, and knocked there on the window, just as he did earlier.

Alison answered, “Who’s there that’s knocking? I believe it’s a thief!”

“Why, no,” he said. “God knows, my sweet lover, I am your Absalom, darling.” He said, “I have brought you a ring of gold. My mother gave it to me, so may God save me. It is very fine, and well-engraved. I will give this to you, if you kiss me.”

Nicolas had just gotten up to pee, and thought he would top the joke—Absalom would kiss his bum before he left. He opened the window hastily, and discreetly put out his bum, over the buttocks to the thighbone.

Then the clerk, this Absalom, said, “Speak, sweet bird, I don’t know where you are.”

Nicolas immediately let a fart fly out, as great as if it had been a thunderclap, so that with the blast Absalom was almost blinded. But he was ready with his glowing iron, and struck Nicolas across his bum. About a hand’s-length of skin came off. The hot plow-blade so burned his behind that he thought he would die from the pain.

“Help! Water! Water! Help, for the love of God!”

The carpenter was roused out of his sleep, and heard someone cry ‘water!’ as if he were crazed, and thought, “Alas! Now Noah’s flood has come!”

He sat himself up without more words, and with his axe he cut the cords in two, and down went everything—he had no time to be concerned about anything, neither the bread nor ale—until he crashed to the wood on the floor, where he lay in a faint.

Up jumped Alison and Nicolas, who shouted, ‘Hey’ and ‘Help’ in the street. The neighbors, both rich and poor, ran in to look at this man, who was still lying in a faint, pale and white, for in the fall he had broken his arm.

But he must account for his own harm; for when he spoke, he was overcome at once by handsome Nicolas and Alison. They told everyone that he was crazy; he was so afraid of Noah’s flood in his fantasy that in idiocy he had bought himself three bread-tubs and had hanged them in the ceiling above; and that he had begged them, for the love of God, to sit in the roof to keep him company.

The people began to laugh at his fantasies. They looked and pointed at the roof, and turned all his troubles into a joke. For whatever this carpenter said in return, it was for nothing—no man heard his reasons.

He swore such great oaths that he was considered crazy in all the town; for every clerk stood firmly by the other. They said, “The man is nuts, my dear brother!” And every person began to laugh at this affair.

Thus the carpenter’s wife was bedded, despite all his efforts and jealousy, and Absalom has kissed her lower eye, and Nicolas is burned in the bum. This tale is finished, and God save the rest of us!

The Wife of Bath's Tale



Experience, though noon auctoritee
 Were in this world, were right ynogh to me
 To speke of wo that is in mariage;
 For, lordynges, sith I twelf yeer was of age,—
 Y-thonked be God, that is eterne on lyve!
 Housbondes at chirchê dore I have had fyve;
 For I so oftê have y-wedded bee;
 And alle were worthy men in hir degree.

In the days of old of King Arthur, of whom the
 British speak with great respect, the land was
 filled with fairies! The elf queen, with her jolly
 companions, would dance in many a green
 meadow. This was the way things were, as
 I've been told—I speak about many hundreds
 of years ago.

But now no one sees elves anymore, because
 of the great works and prayers of priests and
 other holy friars, who go about every land and
 every stream, as thick as moths in the sunbeam,
 blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies'
 bedrooms, cities and towns and castles and
 high towers, manors and barns and stables, yes,
 and dairies—this causes there to now be no
 fairies.

For where many an elf used to walk, now in
 the same place walks the friar himself, in
 noons and afternoons and mornings, saying his
 matins and such holy things, as he goes round
 his district in his gown. Women may now
 safely go up and down, in every corner or
 under every tree. There is no other monster but
 he, who would give them nothing but
 dishonor!

Experience—even if there were no other
 authorities in this world—would be enough
 For me to speak of the woes of marriage!
 For, sirs, since I was twelve years of age
 (Thanks be to God, who lives eternally)
 I have had five husbands at the church door,
 For this is how often I have been married;
 And all were worthy men in their own way.

And so it came to be that this King Arthur had
 a lively bachelor in his court, who one day
 came ride along a river, and as it happened he
 saw a maiden, as alone as when she was born,
 walking through the grains. From her, despite
 whatever she could say and do, he took her
 virginity at once by force!

For this crime there was such fuss, and so
 many people appealing to King Arthur, that
 this knight was soon condemned to be dead,
 by course of law, and should have lost his
 head, in accordance with the statute then—
 except that the other ladies and the queen
 begged the king for so long to show him
 mercy, that the king granted him his life, at
 last, in place of the law. The king then gave
 him to the queen to do as she wished, whether
 she would save him or spill his blood.

The queen thanked the king with all her might,
 and after this she spoke to the knight: “You
 still stand in danger for your life, for which
 you have no security. I'll grant you your life if
 you can tell me this: what thing it is that
 women desire the most. Be wise, and keep
 your neck away from the harsh bite of iron!

And if you cannot tell me right now, then I will give you permission to go away, for twelve months and a day, to seek and find out a sufficient answer in this grave matter. I want your word as a knight, before you go forth, that you will yield your body to me in this place.”

The knight was miserable, and sighed sadly. But he could not do as he pleased, and finally he chose that he would go away, and come back at the end of twelve months’ time, with such an answer as God would provide, and so he made his goodbye and went.

He sought out every house and every place where he hoped to find grace, to learn what women love the most of all; but it did not come to him anywhere—nowhere did he find two people who agreed clearly with each other.

Some said that women all loved riches the best, some said good reputation, and some said beauty; some said fine clothes, some said a good time in bed, and to be widowed and remarried often. Some said that our poor hearts are most eased, when we are most flattered and pleased. (And he wasn’t far from the truth, I’ll admit; a man may win us best with flattery, and with attentions and with concern we’re often caught, both the greater and the lesser of us.)

And some say as well that we love best to be free to do as we please, and that no man will condemn us for our vices. If you believe we speak wisely, take our advice: there is not one of us, that if someone tries to scold us, who won’t kick back even if he tells the truth. Try and find out, I tell you truly! No matter how much sin we have inside, we want to be thought of as wise and innocent of fault.

And some people say that we take great delight in being thought of as loyal and faithful, and committed to one purpose, and to not betray something that a man might say. But that garbage isn’t worth the handle on a rake! By God, we women can’t keep anything secret, as Midas would know. Do you want to hear the story?

Ovid, among other small talk, said Midas had two donkey’s ears that grew secretly there underneath his long curly hair—a defect he

tried to hide as best he could, craftily from every person’s sight. And so no one knew about it at all except his wife. He loved her the most, and trusted her also. And he begged of her that she wouldn’t tell anyone about his filthy deformity to any creature. She swore to him that no, for all the things in the world, she would never commit such a wickedness or sin, and cause her husband to have such a foul name; nor would she tell it for the shame it would bring to her.

Nevertheless, she thought she would die after having had to keep the secret hidden for so long! It seemed to swell so big around her heart that she thought for sure some word would jump out of her mouth. And since she did not dare to tell it to any man, she ran down to the marsh nearby, with her heart on fire. And like a bird calling over the lake she laid her mouth close to the water and said, “Don’t betray me, rushing waters! I tell it to no one else but you. My husband has two long ears like a donkey’s! Now my heart is at peace, since it is out; I couldn’t hide it any longer, there’s no doubt.”

Here you may see, that even though we wait a while, it must come out. We cannot hide any secret! The rest of this story, if you would like to hear, can be read in Ovid; it appears in his book. This tale is mainly about the knight.

When he could not find out what he was looking for, that is, the thing that women love the most, the spirit in his breast was full of sadness. But home he went; he could not delay any longer. The day had come for him to turn around. And on it way it happened as he was riding, in all his worries, that beneath the edge of a forest he saw dancing before him, a good twenty and four more ladies, maybe more.

He rode eagerly toward the dance, in hope that there might be some wisdom for him to learn there. But in truth, just before he came upon them, the dancers vanished, who knows where. He saw no creature that gave any sign of life, except, on the green, an old wife sitting. No man could imagine an uglier being!

This old woman rose before the knight, and said, “Sir knight, there is nothing this way that anyone has traveled through. Tell me what you are looking for, and what your intentions are.

Maybe by chance you'll benefit from it—these old folk know many things," she said.

"Dear madam," the knight said, for sure, "I am as good as dead, unless I can tell the truth, about what women most desire. If you can inform me, I'd reward your time well." "Then give me your word, hand in hand," she replied, "That you will do whatever it may be, the thing I ask, if it lies in your power. And I'll give you your answer before this day is over."

"Have my word here," he said. "I grant this to you." "Then," said the old woman, "I can boast of this, that your life is safe! And I will stand on my word that upon my life, the queen will say the same as I do. Let's see who is the proudest of them all, who wears a kerchief on her head, who would dare say no to what I will say! Let's go now, without any more delay."

She whispered some words of comfort in his ear, and told him to be happy and to have no fear. When they had come to the court, the knight said he had kept his promise as was right, and had his answer ready. Many a noble wife, and many a young maid, and many a widow was assembled there, since they are so wise. And the queen herself was sitting there as high justice, waiting to hear his answer.

The knight was ordered to present himself; command was given for silence in the hall, and that the knight would say, before all of them, what thing all women of the world love the best. The knight did not stand dumb, as a beast does, but promptly answered with a manly voice, so that the whole court heard. "My dear lady," he said, "in general women want to have authority over their husbands as well as their love, and to have mastery above all. You may kill me if you like, but this is the thing you most desire! I am here at your will."

In all the court there was no wife or maid or widow who denied what he said. But all agreed that he was worthy to have his life. And with that word the old woman jumped up, the one he had seen sitting on the green.

"Mercy, my supreme lady queen! Before the court is dismissed, give me my rights! For it was I who taught this knight to give this answer, and for this he pledged his word out there, that the first thing I would ask of him he

would do it, if it was in his power. Now before the court, I ask of you, Sir knight," she said, "that you will take me for your wife. For you know it well that I have saved your life. If this isn't true, say so, upon your wishes!"

The knight replied, "Alas! That I promised you this I won't deny. But for God's sake, I beg of you, make a different request. Take all of my wealth and let my body go!"

"No, then," she said, "curse us if I do! For though I may be ugly and old and poor, I will not, for all the metal or gold that can be dug from the earth or lies above it, have anything except to be your wife and your true love!"

"My *love*?" he cried. "No, rather my damnation! Alas that any of my nation or rank should ever be so foully disgraced like this!"

But it was all for nothing. The end was this, that he was so obligated as to have to get married, and take his old wife and go to bed with her. Now, it might happen that some people might say that out of my carelessness I pay no attention to describing the joy and all of the finery that were seen at the wedding celebration that day. But I can make a short answer: I tell you, there was no joy or feasting at all, only heaviness and gloomy sorrow.

For he wedded her secretly the next day, and all day after he hid himself away like an owl. So sad he was, for his old wife looked so hideous. Great was the misery the knight had in his thoughts, when he was escorted to his marriage bed with her. He rolled around and turned himself back and forth.

His old wife lay there, always smiling, and said, "Oh, my dear husband! Bless you! Does every knight act this way with his new bride? Is this the tradition in King Arthur's house? Are all of his knights so useless in bed? I am your own true love, and what's more, your wife. I am she who saved your very life, and in truth, I've never done you any wrong. Why do you treat me this way, our first long night together? You act like a man who has lost his wits. What did I do wrong? For God's sake tell me, and I will amend it, if I can."

"Amended!" cried the knight. "Alas, no, never! It will never be amended, ever, no! You

are so loathsome and so old as well, and born of so low a rank. It's no wonder I toss and turn, for if only God would break my heart within my chest!"

"Is this the cause of your unhappiness?" she said. "Yes, for certain," he said, "and it can't be any surprise."

"Now, Sir Knight," she said, "I could fix all of this if I wished to, and before three days had passed, if you would conduct yourself well towards me. But since you talk about such gentility as descends from old wealth, if men claim that this makes them gentlemen, to me this arrogance is not worth a hen."

"Find the man who is always virtuous, alone or in public, and who always tries to do whatever good deeds he can, and take him to be the truest gentleman. Christ wants that we claim virtue from Him, not from ancestors holding land. For though they give us their heritage, which lets us claim to be of high lineage, we can't inherit their righteous living, or anything that made men say they were noble and caused them to invite us to follow their examples."

"Well does that wise poet of great Florence, Dante, speak his mind on this subject—it can be translated something like this—'Human nobility rarely grows up from its own humble branches, for God, out of His goodness, wants us to claim our virtue from Him.' We can claim nothing from our bodily fathers except for material things, which men can damage and steal."

"And everyone knows this as well as I do; if nobility naturally followed within a certain bloodline, down the generations, I'd guess that in private and in public they'd always show the manners of gentleness, and never fall to sin and shameful conduct."

"Take a fire and carry it into the darkest house between here and the mountain of Caucasus, and let men shut the doors and turn away from them; yet the fire will blaze and burn just as brightly, as if twenty thousand men were watching it. It will hold its nature and its duty, I'll risk my life to say, until it dies out."

"From this you will see that true nobility is not related to the wealth a man may own, just as people do not always do right, as everyone can see, as the fire does according to its nature. For God knows that men can often see a lord's son doing shame and crime. And he who prizes his nobility from being born into some old family, with good and righteous ancestors, but will not do any of those good deeds himself, nor follow the example of the name he inherits—he is not noble even if he's a duke or earl. For acting like a peasant makes a man a peasant."

"Gentility isn't just the honor you receive from ancestors who showed some greatness, which you had nothing to do with. Your own gentility comes from God alone. From there comes our true nobility, through grace. It was not given to us because of our rank or place."

"Think how noble, as Valerius says, Tullius Hostilius was, who rose out of poverty to a high station. Seneca and Boethius also state, and you will see there is no doubt to it, that the man is noble who does noble deeds. And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude: although my ancestors were low-born, yet may the high Lord God, as I hope, grant me the grace to live virtuously. Then I'll be noble when I live in righteousness and do no sin."

"And when you condemn me for poverty, I say the high God, in whom we believe, lived His life in voluntary poverty. And surely every man, or maid, or wife may understand that Jesus, Heaven's King, would not have chosen a corrupt lifestyle."

"Glad poverty is an honest thing, that's plain, and Seneca and other writers agree. Whoever is content in his poverty is to me rich, even if he doesn't own a shirt. And he who is greedy for more is a poor creature, for he wants all that is beyond his grasp. But he who doesn't have riches, and doesn't desire them, is rich even if you think of him as a beggar."

"True poverty is a natural song! Juvenal speaks in joy about it: 'The poor man, when he walks on the street, can sing and play in front of the thieves.' Poverty is a hateful good, as I guess, and a great remover of cares. It is a great improver of wisdom, too, for he who takes it with proper patience. Poverty is all this,

though it may seem to be misery; may no one dispute its qualities, I say.”

“Often poverty, when a man is low, makes him see God and even himself truly. And poverty is an eye-glass, it seems to me, which allows a man to see his true friends. Thus since you’ve gotten no insult from me, why condemn me for my poverty!”

“And now, Sir Knight, about my age which you have condemned me for. Truly, sir, even if no authority had written it in a book, you gentlemen of honor say that men should show respect to the aged, and call him father out of your refinement. And I could find authors to write on this, I guess.”

“And now, since you say that I am ugly and old, then you will have no worries about being made a cheated husband! For dirt and age, however rich I were, are powerful guardians over faithfulness.”

“Nevertheless, since I know what you want, I’ll satisfy your worldly appetite. Make a choice,” she said, “out of these two things, yes: To have me old and ugly until I die, and to have me as your faithful and humble wife, and I will never anger you in all of my life; Or, to have me young and beautiful, and take your chances with those who come to visit your house, because of me, or in some other place as the case may be. Now choose which you like better and tell me.”

The knight thought, and sighed over his burden. But at last he replied as I’ll tell you: “My lady and my love, and my wife so dear, I put myself under your wise direction. You choose which will be more pleasing, and will bring more honor to you, and to me also. I don’t care which one it is of these two choices, for if you like it, that is enough for me.”

“Then do I have authority over you in this, since I may choose and decide, in truth?”

“Yes, truly, my wife,” he said, “I believe that’s best.”

“Then kiss me,” she said, “and we won’t be angry with each other anymore, for by my word, I will be both. That is to say, I will be both good and beautiful. I pray to God that I

lose my mind, I say to you, if I’m not as loyal and kind as any wife was since the world was new. And if I’m not seen to be as lovely as any lady, empress, or great queen between the east and the far west, do as you wish with my life or death! Throw back the curtains and see how things are!”

And when the knight saw all of this in truth, and how she was so beautiful, and young as well, he clasped her in his two strong arms, and his heart bathed in waters of pure joy. A thousand times he kissed her, and she obeyed his wishes in everything that might give him pleasure.

And so they lived their lives until their fair end, in perfect happiness. And may Christ send us meek husbands, and young ones, and lively in bed, and send us the good luck to outlive the men we marry. And I pray that Jesus will cut short the lives of anyone who refuses to be governed by his wife; and for old and crabby cheapskates counting their pennies, may He send them a plague on their bodies!