translation of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* into modern English is also published in the Penguin Classics. Professor Coghill, who died in November 1980, will perhaps be best remembered for this translation which has become an enduring bestseller.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales

Translated into Modern English by
NEVILL COGHILL

PENGUIN BOOKS

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FOR
Richard Freeman
Brian Ball
Glynne Wickham
Peter Whillans
Graham Binns

[GROUP A]

THE PROLOGUE

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr,* quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.
    It happened in that season that one day
In Southwark, at *The Tabard*, as I lay
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry folk happening then to fall
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide;
They made us easy, all was of the best.
And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,

I'd spoken to them all upon the trip
And was soon one with them in fellowship,
Pledged to rise early and to take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.
But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say
What their condition was, the full array
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.
There was a *Knight*, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honour, generousness and courtesy.
He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as in heathen places,
And ever honoured for his noble graces.
When we took Alexandria,* he was there.
He often sat at table in the chair
Of honour, above all nations, when in Prussia.
In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,
No Christian man so often, of his rank.
When, in Granada, Algeciras sank
Under assault, he had been there, and in
North Africa, raiding Benamarin;
In Anatolia he had been as well
And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,
For all along the Mediterranean coast
He had embarked with many a noble host.
In fifteen mortal battles he had been
And jousted for our faith at Tramissene
Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.
This same distinguished knight had led the van
Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work
For him against another heathen Turk;

He was of sovereign value in all eyes.
And though so much distinguished, he was wise
And in his bearing modest as a maid.
He never yet a boorish thing had said
In all his life to any, come what might;
He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.
Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark
With smudges where his armour had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks
To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.
He had his son with him, a fine young *Squire*,
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire
With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.
In stature he was of a moderate length,
With wonderful agility and strength.
He'd seen some service with the cavalry
In Flanders and Artois and Picardy
And had done valiantly in little space
Of time, in hope to win his lady's grace.
He was embroidered like a meadow bright
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.
Singing he was, or fluting all the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide;
He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.
He could make songs and poems and recite,
Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.
He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale
He slept as little as a nightingale.
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved to serve his father at the table.
There was a *Yeoman* with him at his side,
No other servant; so he chose to ride.
This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen

And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while
– For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,
His arrows never drooped their feathers low –
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
His head was like a nut, his face was brown.
He knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.
A saucy brace was on his arm to ward
It from the bow-string, and a shield and sword
Hung at one side, and at the other slipped
A jaunty dirk, spear-sharp and well-equipped.
A medal of St Christopher he wore
Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
That dangled from a baldrick of bright green.
He was a proper forester, I guess.

There also was a *Nun*, a Prioress,
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
Her greatest oath was only 'By St Loy!'
And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
And well she sang a service, with a fine
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,
And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;
French in the Paris style she did not know.
At meat her manners were well taught withal;
No morsel from her lips did she let fall,
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
But she could carry a morsel up and keep
The smallest drop from falling on her breast.
For courtliness she had a special zest,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.
She certainly was very entertaining,
Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining
To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,
A stately bearing fitting to her place,

And to seem dignified in all her dealings.
As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
She was so charitably solicitous
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.
And she had little dogs she would be feeding
With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.
And bitterly she wept if one were dead
Or someone took a stick and made it smart;
She was all sentiment and tender heart.
Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,
Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-grey;
Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,
Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,
Almost a span across the brows, I own;
She was indeed by no means undergrown.
Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.
She wore a coral trinket on her arm,
A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,*
Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen
On which there first was graven a crowned A,
And lower, *Amor vincit omnia.*

Another *Nun*, the secretary at her cell,
Was riding with her, and *three Priests* as well.

A *Monk* there was, one of the finest sort
Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.
A manly man, to be an Abbot able;
Many a dainty horse he had in stable.
His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear
Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,
Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell
Where my lord Monk was Prior of the cell.
The Rule of good St Benet or St Maur
As old and strict he tended to ignore;
He let go by the things of yesterday
And took the modern world's more spacious way.
He did not rate that text at a plucked hen
Which says that hunters are not holy men

And that a monk uncloistered is a mere
Fish out of water, flapping on the pier,
That is to say a monk out of his cloister.
That was a text he held not worth an oyster;
And I agreed and said his views were sound;
Was he to study till his head went round
Poring over books in cloisters? Must he toil
As Austin bade and till the very soil?
Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?
Let Austin have his labour to himself.

This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.
Hunting a hare or riding at a fence
Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.
I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand
With fine grey fur, the finest in the land,
And on his hood, to fasten it at his chin
He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;
Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.
His head was bald and shone like looking-glass;
So did his face, as if it had been greased.
He was a fat and personable priest;
His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle.
They glittered like the flames beneath a kettle;
Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.
He was a prelate fit for exhibition,
He was not pale like a tormented soul.
He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.
His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

There was a *Friar,* a wanton one and merry,
A Limiter,* a very festive fellow.
In all Four Orders* there was none so mellow,
So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.
He'd fixed up many a marriage, giving each
Of his young women what he could afford her.
He was a noble pillar to his Order.
Highly beloved and intimate was he
With County folk within his boundary,

And city dames of honour and possessions;
For he was qualified to hear confessions,
Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;
He had a special licence from the Pope.
Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift
With pleasant absolution, for a gift.
He was an easy man in penance-giving
Where he could hope to make a decent living;
It's a sure sign whenever gifts are given
To a poor Order that a man's well shriven,
And should he give enough he knew in verity
The penitent repented in sincerity.
For many a fellow is so hard of heart
He cannot weep, for all his inward smart.
Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer
One should give silver for a poor Friar's care.
He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls,
And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.
And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,
For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.
At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.
His neck was whiter than a lily-flower
But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.
He knew the taverns well in every town
And every innkeeper and barmaid too
Better than lepers, beggars and that crew,
For in so eminent a man as he
It was not fitting with the dignity
Of his position, dealing with a scum
Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come
Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,
But only with the rich and victual-sellers.
But anywhere a profit might accrue
Courteous he was and lowly of service too.
Natural gifts like his were hard to match.
He was the finest beggar of his batch,
And, for his begging-district, paid a rent;
His brethren did no poaching where he went.

For though a widow mightn't have a shoe,
So pleasant was his holy how-d'ye-do
He got his farthing from her just the same
Before he left, and so his income came
To more than he laid out. And how he romped,
Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt
To arbitrate disputes on settling days
(For a small fee) in many helpful ways,
Not then appearing as your cloistered scholar
With threadbare habit hardly worth a dollar,
But much more like a Doctor or a Pope.
Of double-worsted was the semi-cope
Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold
About him, like a bell about its mould
When it is casting, rounded out his dress.
He lisped a little out of wantonness
To make his English sweet upon his tongue.
When he had played his harp, or having sung,
His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright
As any star upon a frosty night.
This worthy's name was Hubert, it appeared.
  There was a *Merchant* with a forking beard
And motley dress; high on his horse he sat,
Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat
And on his feet daintily buckled boots.
He told of his opinions and pursuits
In solemn tones, he harped on his increase
Of capital; there should be sea-police
(He thought) upon the Harwich–Holland ranges;
He was expert at dabbling in exchanges.
This estimable Merchant so had set
His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,
He was so stately in administration,
In loans and bargains and negotiation.
He was an excellent fellow all the same;
To tell the truth I do not know his name.
  An *Oxford Cleric*, still a student though,
One who had taken logic long ago,

Was there; his horse was thinner than a rake,
And he was not too fat, I undertake,
But had a hollow look, a sober stare;
The thread upon his overcoat was bare.
He had found no preferment in the church
And he was too unworldly to make search
For secular employment. By his bed
He preferred having twenty books in red
And black, of Aristotle's philosophy,
Than costly clothes, fiddle or psaltery.
Though a philosopher, as I have told,
He had not found the stone for making gold.
Whatever money from his friends he took
He spent on learning or another book
And prayed for them most earnestly, returning
Thanks to them thus for paying for his learning.
His only care was study, and indeed
He never spoke a word more than was need,
Formal at that, respectful in the extreme,
Short, to the point, and lofty in his theme.
A tone of moral virtue filled his speech
And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.
  A Serjeant at the Law who paid his calls,
Wary and wise, for clients at St Paul's*
There also was, of noted excellence.
Discreet he was, a man to reverence,
Or so he seemed, his sayings were so wise.
He often had been Justice of Assize
By letters patent, and in full commission.
His fame and learning and his high position
Had won him many a robe and many a fee.
There was no such conveyancer as he;
All was fee-simple to his strong digestion,
Not one conveyance could be called in question.
Though there was nowhere one so busy as he,
He was less busy than he seemed to be.
He knew of every judgement, case and crime
Ever recorded since King William's time.

He could dictate defences or draft deeds;
No one could pinch a comma from his screeds
And he knew every statute off by rote.
He wore a homely parti-coloured coat,
Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff;
Of his appearance I have said enough.

There was a *Franklin** with him, it appeared;
White as a daisy-petal was his beard.
A sanguine man, high-coloured and benign,
He loved a morning sop of cake in wine.
He lived for pleasure and had always done,
For he was Epicurus' very son,
In whose opinion sensual delight
Was the one true felicity in sight.
As noted as St Julian was for bounty
He made his household free to all the County.
His bread, his ale were finest of the fine
And no one had a better stock of wine.
His house was never short of bake-meat pies,
Of fish and flesh, and these in such supplies
It positively snowed with meat and drink
And all the dainties that a man could think.
According to the seasons of the year
Changes of dish were ordered to appear.
He kept fat partridges in coops, beyond,
Many a bream and pike were in his pond.
Woe to the cook unless the sauce was hot
And sharp, or if he wasn't on the spot!
And in his hall a table stood arrayed
And ready all day long, with places laid.
As Justice at the Sessions none stood higher;
He often had been Member for the Shire.
A dagger and a little purse of silk
Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.
As Sheriff he checked audit, every entry.
He was a model among landed gentry.

A *Haberdasher*, a *Dyer*, a *Carpenter*,
A *Weaver* and a *Carpet-maker* were

Among our ranks, all in the livery
Of one impressive guild-fraternity.
They were so trim and fresh their gear would pass
For new. Their knives were not tricked out with brass
But wrought with purest silver, which avouches
A like display on girdles and on pouches.
Each seemed a worthy burgess, fit to grace
A guild-hall with a seat upon the dais.
Their wisdom would have justified a plan
To make each one of them an alderman;
They had the capital and revenue,
Besides their wives declared it was their due.
And if they did not think so, then they ought;
To be called '*Madam*' is a glorious thought,
And so is going to church and being seen
Having your mantle carried, like a queen.

They had a *Cook* with them who stood alone
For boiling chicken with a marrow-bone,
Sharp flavouring-powder and a spice for savour.
He could distinguish London ale by flavour,
And he could roast and seethe and broil and fry,
Make good thick soup and bake a tasty pie.
But what a pity – so it seemed to me,
That he should have an ulcer on his knee.
As for blancmange, he made it with the best.

There was a *Skipper* hailing from far west;
He came from Dartmouth, so I understood.
He rode a farmer's horse as best he could,
In a woollen gown that reached his knee.
A dagger on a lanyard falling free
Hung from his neck under his arm and down.
The summer heat had tanned his colour brown,
And certainly he was an excellent fellow.
Many a draught of vintage, red and yellow,
He'd drawn at Bordeaux, while the trader snored.
The nicer rules of conscience he ignored.
If, when he fought, the enemy vessel sank,
He sent his prisoners home; they walked the plank.

As for his skill in reckoning his tides,
Currents and many another risk besides,
Moons, harbours, pilots, he had such dispatch
That none from Hull to Carthage was his match.
Hardy he was, prudent in undertaking;
His beard in many a tempest had its shaking,
And he knew all the havens as they were
From Gottland to the Cape of Finisterre,
And every creek in Brittany and Spain;
The barge he owned was called The *Maudelayne*.

A *Doctor* too emerged as we proceeded;
No one alive could talk as well as he did
On points of medicine and of surgery,
For, being grounded in astronomy,
He watched his patient closely for the hours
When, by his horoscope, he knew the powers
Of favourable planets, then ascendent,
Worked on the images* for his dependant.
The cause of every malady you'd got
He knew, and whether dry, cold, moist or hot;*
He knew their seat, their humour and condition.
He was a perfect practising physician.
These causes being known for what they were,
He gave the man his medicine then and there.
All his apothecaries in a tribe
Were ready with the drugs he would prescribe
And each made money from the other's guile;
They had been friendly for a goodish while.
He was well-versed in Aesculapius* too
And what Hippocrates and Rufus knew
And Dioscorides, now dead and gone,
Galen and Rhazes, Hali, Serapion,
Averroes, Avicenna, Constantine,
Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine.
In his own diet he observed some measure;
There were no superfluities for pleasure,
Only digestives, nutritives and such.
He did not read the Bible very much.

In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish grey
And lined with taffeta, he rode his way;
Yet he was rather close as to expenses
And kept the gold he won in pestilences.
Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.
He therefore had a special love of gold.

A worthy *woman* from beside *Bath* city
Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
In making cloth she showed so great a bent
She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.
In all the parish not a dame dared stir
Towards the altar steps in front of her,
And if indeed they did, so wrath was she
As to be quite put out of charity.
Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground;
I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,
The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.
Her hose were of the finest scarlet red
And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.
Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.
A worthy woman all her life, what's more
She'd had five husbands, all at the church door,
Apart from other company in youth;
No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.
And she had thrice been to Jerusalem,
Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;
She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne,
St James of Compostella and Cologne,
And she was skilled in wandering by the way.
She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.
Easily on an ambling horse she sat
Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a shield;
She had a flowing mantle that concealed
Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.
In company she liked to laugh and chat
And knew the remedies for love's mischances,
An art in which she knew the oldest dances.

A holy-minded man of good renown
There was, and poor, the *Parson* to a town,
Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.
He also was a learned man, a clerk,
Who truly knew Christ's gospel and would preach it
Devoutly to parishioners, and teach it.
Benign and wonderfully diligent,
And patient when adversity was sent
(For so he proved in much adversity)
He hated cursing to extort a fee,
Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt
Giving to poor parishioners round about
Both from church offerings and his property;
He could in little find sufficiency.
Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,
Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,
In sickness or in grief, to pay a call
On the remotest, whether great or small,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave.
This noble example to his sheep he gave
That first he wrought, and afterwards he taught;
And it was from the Gospel he had caught
Those words, and he would add this figure too,
That if gold rust, what then will iron do?
For if a priest be foul in whom we trust
No wonder that a common man should rust;
And shame it is to see – let priests take stock –
A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock.
The true example that a priest should give
Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.
He did not set his benefice to hire
And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire
Or run to London to earn easy bread
By singing masses for the wealthy dead,
Or find some Brotherhood and get enrolled.
He stayed at home and watched over his fold
So that no wolf should make the sheep miscarry.
He was a shepherd and no mercenary.

Holy and virtuous he was, but then
Never contemptuous of sinful men,
Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,
But was discreet in teaching and benign.
His business was to show a fair behaviour
And draw men thus to Heaven and their Saviour,
Unless indeed a man were obstinate;
And such, whether of high or low estate,
He put to sharp rebuke, to say the least.
I think there never was a better priest.
He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,
No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.
Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore
He taught, but followed it himself before.

There was a *Plowman* with him there, his brother;
Many a load of dung one time or other
He must have carted through the morning dew.
He was an honest worker, good and true,
Living in peace and perfect charity,
And, as the gospel bade him, so did he,
Loving God best with all his heart and mind
And then his neighbour as himself, repined
At no misfortune, slacked for no content,
For steadily about his work he went
To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure
Or make a ditch; and he would help the poor
For love of Christ and never take a penny
If he could help it, and, as prompt as any,
He paid his tithes in full when they were due
On what he owned, and on his earnings too.
He wore a tabard smock and rode a mare.

There was a *Reeve*, also a *Miller*, there,
A College *Manciple* from the Inns of Court,
A papal *Pardoner* and, in close consort,
A Church-Court *Summoner*, riding at a trot,
And finally myself – that was the lot.

The *Miller* was a chap of sixteen stone,
A great stout fellow big in brawn and bone.

He did well out of them, for he could go
And win the ram at any wrestling show.
Broad, knotty and short-shouldered, he would boast
He could heave any door off hinge and post,
Or take a run and break it with his head.
His beard, like any sow or fox, was red
And broad as well, as though it were a spade;
And, at its very tip, his nose displayed
A wart on which there stood a tuft of hair
Red as the bristles in an old sow's ear.
His nostrils were as black as they were wide.
He had a sword and buckler at his side,
His mighty mouth was like a furnace door.
A wrangler and buffoon, he had a store
Of tavern stories, filthy in the main.
His was a master-hand at stealing grain.
He felt it with his thumb and thus he knew
Its quality and took three times his due –
A thumb of gold, by God, to gauge an oat!
He wore a hood of blue and a white coat.
He liked to play his bagpipes up and down
And that was how he brought us out of town.

The *Manciple* came from the Inner Temple;
All caterers might follow his example
In buying victuals; he was never rash
Whether he bought on credit or paid cash.
He used to watch the market most precisely
And got in first, and so he did quite nicely.
Now isn't it a marvel of God's grace
That an illiterate fellow can outpace
The wisdom of a heap of learned men?
His masters – he had more than thirty then –
All versed in the abstrusest legal knowledge,
Could have produced a dozen from their College
Fit to be stewards in land and rents and game
To any Peer in England you could name,
And show him how to live on what he had
Debt-free (unless of course the Peer were mad)

Or be as frugal as he might desire,
And make them fit to help about the Shire
In any legal case there was to try;
And yet this Manciple could wipe their eye.

The *Reeve** was old and choleric and thin;
His beard was shaven closely to the skin,
His shorn hair came abruptly to a stop
Above his ears, and he was docked on top
Just like a priest in front; his legs were lean,
Like sticks they were, no calf was to be seen.
He kept his bins and garners very trim;
No auditor could gain a point on him.
And he could judge by watching drought and rain
The yield he might expect from seed and grain.
His master's sheep, his animals and hens,
Pigs, horses, dairies, stores and cattle-pens
Were wholly trusted to his government.
He had been under contract to present
The accounts, right from his master's earliest years.
No one had ever caught him in arrears.
No bailiff, serf or herdsman dared to kick,
He knew their dodges, knew their every trick;
Feared like the plague he was, by those beneath.
He had a lovely dwelling on a heath,
Shadowed in green by trees above the sward.
A better hand at bargains than his lord,
He had grown rich and had a store of treasure
Well tucked away, yet out it came to pleasure
His lord with subtle loans or gifts of goods,
To earn his thanks and even coats and hoods.
When young he'd learnt a useful trade and still
He was a carpenter of first-rate skill.
The stallion-cob he rode at a slow trot
Was dapple-grey and bore the name of Scot.
He wore an overcoat of bluish shade
And rather long; he had a rusty blade
Slung at his side. He came, as I heard tell,
From Norfolk, near a place called Baldeswell.

His coat was tucked under his belt and splayed.
He rode the hindmost of our cavalcade.
There was a *Summoner** with us at that Inn,
His face on fire, like a cherubin,*
For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,
He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.
Black scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.
Children were afraid when he appeared.
No quicksilver, lead ointment, tartar creams,
No brimstone, no boracic, so it seems,
Could make a salve that had the power to bite,
Clean up or cure his whelks of knobby white
Or purge the pimples sitting on his cheeks.
Garlic he loved, and onions too, and leeks,
And drinking strong red wine till all was hazy.
Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy,
And wouldn't speak a word except in Latin
When he was drunk, such tags as he was pat in;
He only had a few, say two or three,
That he had mugged up out of some decree;
No wonder, for he heard them every day.
And, as you know, a man can teach a jay
To call out 'Walter' better than the Pope.
But had you tried to test his wits and grope
For more, you'd have found nothing in the bag.
Then '*Questio quid juris*' was his tag.*
He was a noble varlet and a kind one,
You'd meet none better if you went to find one.
Why, he'd allow – just for a quart of wine –
Any good lad to keep a concubine
A twelvemonth and dispense him altogether!
And he had finches of his own to feather:
And if he found some rascal with a maid
He would instruct him not to be afraid
In such a case of the Archdeacon's curse
(Unless the rascal's soul were in his purse)
For in his purse the punishment should be.
'Purse is the good Archdeacon's Hell,' said he.

But well I know he lied in what he said;
A curse should put a guilty man in dread,
For curses kill, as shriving brings, salvation.
We should beware of excommunication.
Thus, as he pleased, the man could bring duress
On any young fellow in the diocese.
He knew their secrets, they did what he said.
He wore a garland set upon his head
Large as the holly-bush upon a stake
Outside an ale-house, and he had a cake,
A round one, which it was his joke to wield
As if it were intended for a shield.
He and a gentle *Pardoner** rode together,
A bird from Charing Cross of the same feather,
Just back from visiting the Court of Rome.
He loudly sang, '*Come hither, love, come home*!'
The Summoner sang deep seconds to this song,
No trumpet ever sounded half so strong.
This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
Hanging down smoothly like a hank of flax.
In driblets fell his locks behind his head
Down to his shoulders which they overspread;
Thinly they fell, like rat-tails, one by one.
He wore no hood upon his head, for fun;
The hood inside his wallet had been stowed,
He aimed at riding in the latest mode;
But for a little cap his head was bare
And he had bulging eye-balls, like a hare.
He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap;
His wallet lay before him on his lap,
Brimful of pardons come from Rome, all hot.
He had the same small voice a goat has got.
His chin no beard had harboured, nor would harbour,
Smoother than ever chin was left by barber.
I judge he was a gelding, or a mare.
As to his trade, from Berwick down to Ware
There was no pardoner of equal grace,
For in his trunk he had a pillow-case

Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil.
He said he had a gobbet of the sail
Saint Peter had the time when he made bold
To walk the waves, till Jesu Christ took hold.
He had a cross of metal set with stones
And, in a glass, a rubble of pigs' bones.
And with these relics, any time he found
Some poor up-country parson to astound,
In one short day, in money down, he drew
More than the parson in a month or two,
And by his flatteries and prevarication
Made monkeys of the priest and congregation.
But still to do him justice first and last
In church he was a noble ecclesiast.
How well he read a lesson or told a story!
But best of all he sang an Offertory,
For well he knew that when that song was sung
He'd have to preach and tune his honey-tongue
And (well he could) win silver from the crowd.
That's why he sang so merrily and loud.

Now I have told you shortly, in a clause,
The rank, the array, the number and the cause
Of our assembly in this company
In Southwark, at that high-class hostelry
Known as *The Tabard*, close beside *The Bell*.
And now the time has come for me to tell
How we behaved that evening; I'll begin
After we had alighted at the Inn,
Then I'll report our journey, stage by stage,
All the remainder of our pilgrimage.
But first I beg of you, in courtesy,
Not to condemn me as unmannerly
If I speak plainly and with no conccalings
And give account of all their words and dealings,
Using their very phrases as they fell.
For certainly, as you all know so well,
He who repeats a tale after a man
Is bound to say, as nearly as he can,

Each single word, if he remembers it,
However rudely spoken or unfit,
Or else the tale he tells will be untrue,
The things pretended and the phrases new.
He may not flinch although it were his brother,
He may as well say one word as another.
And Christ Himself spoke broad in Holy Writ,
Yet there is no scurrility in it,
And Plato says, for those with power to read,
'The word should be as cousin to the deed.'
Further I beg you to forgive it me
If I neglect the order and degree
And what is due to rank in what I've planned.
I'm short of wit as you will understand.

Our *Host* gave us great welcome; everyone
Was given a place and supper was begun.
He served the finest victuals you could think,
The wine was strong and we were glad to drink.
A very striking man our Host withal,
And fit to be a marshal in a hall.
His eyes were bright, his girth a little wide;
There is no finer burgess in Cheapside.
Bold in his speech, yet wise and full of tact,
There was no manly attribute he lacked,
What's more he was a merry-hearted man.
After our meal he jokingly began
To talk of sport, and, among other things
After we'd settled up our reckonings,
He said as follows: 'Truly, gentlemen,
You're very welcome and I can't think when
– Upon my word I'm telling you no lie –
I've seen a gathering here that looked so spry,
No, not this year, as in this tavern now.
I'd think you up some fun if I knew how.
And, as it happens, a thought has just occurred
To please you, costing nothing, on my word.
You're off to Canterbury – well, God speed!
Blessed St Thomas answer to your need!

And I don't doubt, before the journey's done
You mean to while the time in tales and fun.
Indeed, there's little pleasure for your bones
Riding along and all as dumb as stones.
So let me then propose for your enjoyment,
Just as I said, a suitable employment.
And if my notion suits and you agree
And promise to submit yourselves to me
Playing your parts exactly as I say
Tomorrow as you ride along the way,
Then by my father's soul (and he is dead)
If you don't like it you can have my head!
Hold up your hands, and not another word.'
  Well, our opinion was not long deferred,
It seemed not worth a serious debate;
We all agreed to it at any rate
And bade him issue what commands he would.
'My lords,' he said, 'now listen for your good,
And please don't treat my notion with disdain.
This is the point. I'll make it short and plain.
Each one of you shall help to make things slip
By telling two stories on the outward trip
To Canterbury, that's what I intend,
And, on the homeward way to journey's end
Another two, tales from the days of old;
And then the man whose story is best told,
That is to say who gives the fullest measure
Of good morality and general pleasure,
He shall be given a supper, paid by all,
Here in this tavern, in this very hall,
When we come back again from Canterbury.
And in the hope to keep you bright and merry
I'll go along with you myself and ride
All at my own expense and serve as guide.
I'll be the judge, and those who won't obey
Shall pay for what we spend upon the way.
Now if you all agree to what you've heard
Tell me at once without another word,

And I will make arrangements early for it.'
  Of course we all agreed, in fact we swore it
Delightedly, and made entreaty too
That he should act as he proposed to do,
Become our Governor in short, and be
Judge of our tales and general referee,
And set the supper at a certain price.
We promised to be ruled by his advice
Come high, come low; unanimously thus
We set him up in judgement over us.
More wine was fetched, the business being done;
We drank it off and up went everyone
To bed without a moment of delay.
  Early next morning at the spring of day
Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock,
Gathering us together in a flock,
And off we rode at slightly faster pace
Than walking to St Thomas' watering-place;
And there our Host drew up, began to ease
His horse, and said, 'Now, listen if you please,
My lords! Remember what you promised me.
If evensong and mattins will agree
Let's see who shall be first to tell a tale.
And as I hope to drink good wine and ale
I'll be your judge. The rebel who disobeys,
However much the journey costs, he pays.
Now draw for cut and then we can depart;
The man who draws the shortest cut shall start.
My Lord the Knight,' he said, 'step up to me
And draw your cut, for that is my decree.
And come you near, my Lady Prioress,
And you, Sir Cleric, drop your shamefastness,
No studying now! A hand from every man!'
Immediately the draw for lots began
And to tell shortly how the matter went,
Whether by chance or fate or accident,
The truth is this, the cut fell to the Knight,
Which everybody greeted with delight.

And tell his tale he must, as reason was
Because of our agreement and because
He too had sworn. What more is there to say?
For when this good man saw how matters lay,
Being by wisdom and obedience driven
To keep a promise he had freely given,
He said, 'Since it's for me to start the game,
Why, welcome be the cut in God's good name!
Now let us ride, and listen to what I say.'
And at the word we started on our way
And in a cheerful style he then began
At once to tell his tale, and thus it ran.

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

PART I

Stories of old have made it known to us
That there was once a Duke called Theseus,
Ruler of Athens, Lord and Governor,
And in his time so great a conqueror
There was none mightier beneath the sun.
And many a rich country he had won,
What with his wisdom and his troops of horse.
He had subdued the Amazons by force
And all their realm, once known as Scythia,
But then called Femeny. Hippolyta,
Their queen, he took to wife, and, says the story,
He brought her home in solemn pomp and glory,
Also her younger sister, Emily.
And thus victorious and with minstrelsy
I leave this noble Duke for Athens bound
With all his host of men-at-arms around.

And were it not too long to tell again
I would have fully pictured the campaign
In which his men-at-arms and he had won
Those territories from the Amazon
And the great battle that was given then
Between those women and the Athenian men,
Or told you how Hippolyta had been
Besieged and taken, fair courageous queen,
And what a feast there was when they were married,
And after of the tempest that had harried
Their home-coming. I pass these over now
Having, God knows, a larger field to plough.
Weak are my oxen for such mighty stuff;
What I have yet to tell is long enough.
I won't delay the others of our rout,
Let every fellow tell his tale about
And see who wins the supper at the Inn.
Where I left off, let me again begin.

This Duke I mentioned, ere alighting down
And on the very outskirts of the town
In all felicity and height of pride
Became aware, casting an eye aside,
That kneeling on the highway, two by two,
A company of ladies were in view
All clothed in black, each pair in proper station
Behind the other. And such lamentation
And cries they uttered, it was past conceiving
The world had ever heard such noise of grieving,
Nor did they hold their misery in check
Till they grasped bridle at his horse's neck.

'Who may you be that, at my coming, so
Perturb my festival with cries of woe?'
Said Theseus. 'Do you grudge the celebration
Of these my honours with your lamentation?
Who can have injured you or who offended?
And tell me if the matter may be mended
And why it is that you are clothed in black?'

The eldest of these ladies answered back,

Fainting a little in such deadly fashion
That but to see and hear her stirred compassion,
And said, 'O Sir, whom Fortune has made glorious
In conquest and is sending home victorious,
We do not grudge your glory in our grief
But rather beg your mercy and relief.
Have pity on our sorrowful distress!
Some drop of pity, in your nobleness,
On us unhappy women let there fall!
For sure there is not one among us all
That was not once a duchess or a queen,
Though wretches now, as may be truly seen,
Thanks be to Fortune and her treacherous wheel
That suffers no estate on earth to feel
Secure, and, waiting on your presence, we,
Here at the shrine of Goddess Clemency,
Have watched a fortnight for this very hour.
Help us, my Lord, it lies within your power.
I, wretched Queen, that weep aloud my woe,
Was wife to King Capaneus long ago
That died at Thebes, accursed be the day!
And we in our disconsolate array
That make this sorrowful appeal to pity
Lost each her husband in that fatal city
During the siege, for so it came to pass.
Now old King Creon – O alas, alas! –
The Lord of Thebes, grown cruel in his age
And filled with foul iniquity and rage,
For tyranny and spite as I have said
Does outrage on the bodies of our dead,
On all our husbands, for when they were slain
Their bodies were dragged out onto the plain
Into a heap, and there, as we have learnt,
They neither may have burial nor be burnt,
But he makes dogs devour them, in scorn.'
  At that they all at once began to mourn,
And every woman fell upon her face
And cried, 'Have pity, Lord, on our disgrace

And let our sorrow sink into your heart.'
  The Duke, who felt a pang of pity start
At what they spoke, dismounted from his steed;
He felt his heart about to break indeed,
Seeing how piteous and disconsolate
They were, that once had been of high estate!
He raised them in his arms and sought to fill
Their hearts with comfort and with kind good will,
And swore on oath that as he was true knight,
So far as it should lie within his might,
He would take vengeance on this tyrant King,
This Creon, till the land of Greece should ring
With how he had encountered him and served
The monster with the death he had deserved.
Instantly then and with no more delay,
He turned and with his banners in display
Made off for Thebes with all his host beside,
For not a step to Athens would he ride,
Nor take his ease so much as half a day,
But marched into the night upon his way.
But yet he sent Hippolyta the Queen
And Emily her sister, the serene,
On into Athens, where they were to dwell,
And off he rode; there is no more to tell.
  The figure of red Mars with spear and targe
So shone upon his banners white and large,
That all the meadows glittered up and down,
And close by them his pennon of renown
Shone rich with gold, emblazoned with that feat,
His slaying of the Minotaur in Crete.
Thus rode this Duke, thus rode this conqueror
And led his flower of chivalry to war,
Until he came to Thebes, there to alight
In splendour on a chosen field to fight.
And, to speak briefly of so great a thing,
He conquered Creon there, the Theban king,
And slew him manfully, as became a knight,
In open battle, put his troops to flight,

And by assault captured the city after
And rent it, roof and wall and spar and rafter;
And to the ladies he restored again
The bones belonging to their husbands slain,
To do, as custom was, their obsequies.
But it were all too long to speak of these,
Or of the clamorous complaint and yearning
These ladies uttered at the place of burning
The bodies, or of all the courtesy
That Theseus, noble in his victory,
Showed to the ladies when they went their way;
I would be brief in what I have to say.

Now when Duke Theseus worthily had done
Justice on Creon and when Thebes was won,
That night, camped in the field, he took his rest,
Having disposed the land as he thought best.

Crawling for ransack among heaps of slain
And stripping their accoutrements for gain,
The pillagers went busily about
After the battle on the field of rout.
And so befell among the heaps they found,
Thrust through with bloody wounds upon the ground,
Two pale young knights there, lying side by side,
Wearing the self-same arms in blazoned pride.
Of these Arcita was the name of one,
That of the other knight was Palamon;
And they were neither fully quick nor dead.
By coat of arms and crest upon the head
The heralds knew, for all the filth and mud,
That they were Princes of the Royal Blood;
Two sisters of the House of Thebes had borne them.
Out of the heap these pillagers have torn them
And gently carried them to Theseus' tent.
And he decreed they should at once be sent
To Athens, and gave order they be kept
Perpetual prisoners – he would accept
No ransom for them. This was done, and then
The noble Duke turned homeward with his men

Crowned with the laurel of his victory,
And there in honour and felicity
He lived his life; what more is there to say?
And in a tower, in grief and anguish lay
Arcite and Palamon, beyond all doubt
For ever, for no gold could buy them out.

Year after year went by, day after day,
Until one morning in the month of May
Young Emily, that fairer was of mien
Than is the lily on its stalk of green,
And fresher in her colouring that strove
With early roses in a May-time grove
– I know not which was fairer of the two –
Ere it was day, as she was wont to do,
Rose and arrayed her beauty as was right,
For May will have no sluggardry at night,
Season that pricks in every gentle heart,
Awaking it from sleep, and bids it start,
Saying, 'Arise! Do thine observance due!'
And this made Emily recall anew
The honour due to May and she arose,
Her beauties freshly clad. To speak of those,
Her yellow hair was braided in a tress
Behind her back, a yard in length, I guess,
And in the garden at the sun's uprising,
Hither and thither at her own devising,
She wandered gathering flowers, white and red,
To make a subtle garland for her head,
And like an angel sang a heavenly song.

The great, grim tower-keep, so thick and strong,
Principal dungeon at the castle's core
Where the two knights, of whom I spoke before
And shall again, were shut, if you recall,
Was close-adjoining to the garden wall
Where Emily chose her pleasures and adornings.
Bright was the sun this loveliest of mornings
And the sad prisoner Palamon had risen,
With licence from the jailer of the prison,

As was his wont, and roamed a chamber high
Above the city, whence he could descry
The noble buildings and the branching green
Where Emily the radiant and serene
Went pausing in her walk and roaming on.
This sorrowful prisoner, this Palamon,
Was pacing round his chamber to and fro
Lamenting to himself in all his woe.
'Alas,' he said, 'that ever I was born!'
And so it happened on this May day morn,
Through a deep window set with many bars
Of mighty iron squared with massive spars,
He chanced on Emily to cast his eye
And, as he did, he blenched and gave a cry
As though he had been stabbed, and to the heart.
And, at the cry, Arcita gave a start
And said, 'My cousin Palamon, what ails you?
How deadly pale you look! Your colour fails you!
Why did you cry? Who can have given offence?
For God's love, take things patiently, have sense,
Think! We are prisoners and shall always be.
Fortune has given us this adversity,
Some wicked planetary dispensation,
Some Saturn's trick or evil constellation
Has given us this, and Heaven, though we had sworn
The contrary, so stood when we were born.
We must endure it, that's the long and short.'
And Palamon in answer made retort,
'Cousin, believe me, your opinion springs
From ignorance and vain imaginings.
Imprisonment was not what made me cry.
I have been hurt this moment through the eye,
Into my heart. It will be death to me.
The fairness of the lady that I see
Roaming the garden yonder to and fro
Is all the cause, and I cried out my woe.
Woman or Goddess, which? I cannot say.
I guess she may be Venus – well she may!'

He fell upon his knees before the sill
And prayed: 'O Venus, if it be thy will
To be transfigured in this garden thus
Before two wretched prisoners like us,
O help us to escape, O make us free!
Yet, if my fate already is shaped for me
By some eternal word, and I must pine
And die in prison, have pity on our line
And kindred, humbled under tyranny!'
Now, as he spoke, Arcita chanced to see
This lady as she roamed there to and fro,
And, at the sight, her beauty hurt him so
That if his cousin had felt the wound before,
Arcite was hurt as much as he, or more,
And with a deep and piteous sigh he said:
'The freshness of her beauty strikes me dead,
'Hers that I see, roaming in yonder place!
Unless I gain the mercy of her grace,
Unless at least I see her day by day,
I am but dead. There is no more to say.'
On hearing this young Palamon looked grim
And in contempt and anger answered him,
'Do you speak this in earnest or in jest?'
'No, in good earnest,' said Arcite, 'the best!
So help me God, I mean no jesting now.'
Then Palamon began to knit his brow:
'It's no great honour, then,' he said, 'to you
To prove so false, to be a traitor too
To me, that am your cousin and your brother,
Both deeply sworn and bound to one another,
Though we should die in torture for it, never
To loose the bond that only death can sever,
And when in love neither to hinder other,
Nor in what else soever, dearest brother,
But truly further me in all I do
As faithfully as I shall further you.
This was our oath and nothing can untie it,
And well I know you dare not now deny it.

I trust you with my secrets, make no doubt,
Yet you would treacherously go about
To love my lady, whom I love and serve
And ever shall, till death cut my heart's nerve.
No, false Arcite! That you shall never do!
I loved her first and told my grief to you
As to the brother and the friend that swore
To further me, as I have said before,
So you are bound in honour as a knight
To help me, should it lie within your might;
Else you are false, I say, your honour vain!'
Arcita proudly answered back again:
'You shall be judged as false,' he said, 'not me;
And false you are, I tell you, utterly!
I loved her as a woman before you.
What can you say? Just now you hardly knew
If she were girl or goddess from above!
Yours is a mystical, a holy love,
And mine is love as to a human being,
And so I told you at the moment, seeing
You were my cousin and sworn friend. At worst
What do I care? Suppose you loved her first,
Haven't you heard the old proverbial saw
"Who ever bound a lover by a law?"?
Love is law unto itself. My hat!
What earthly man can have more law than that?
All man-made law, all positive injunction
Is broken every day without compunction
For love. A man must love, for all his wit;
There's no escape though he should die for it,
Be she a maid, a widow or a wife.
'Yet you are little likely, all your life,
To stand in grace with her; no more shall I.
You know yourself, too well, that here we lie
Condemned to prison both of us, no doubt
Perpetually. No ransom buys us out.
We're like two dogs in battle on their own;
They fought all day but neither got the bone,

There came a kite above them, nothing loth,
And while they fought he took it from them both.
And so it is in politics, dear brother,
Each for himself alone, there is no other.
Love if you want to; I shall love her too,
And that is all there is to say or do.
We're prisoners and must endure it, man,
And each of us must take what chance he can.'
Great was the strife for many a long spell
Between them had I but the time to tell,
But to the point. It happened that one day,
To tell it you as briefly as I may,
A certain famous Duke, Perotheus,
Friend and companion of Duke Theseus
Since they were little children, came to spend
A holiday in Athens with his friend,
Visiting him for pleasure as of yore,
For there was no one living he loved more.
His feelings were as tenderly returned;
Indeed they were so fond, as I have learned,
That when one died (so ancient authors tell)
The other went to seek him down in Hell;
But that's a tale I have no time to treat.
Now this Perotheus knew and loved Arcite
In Theban days of old for many years,
And so, at his entreaty, it appears,
Arcita was awarded his release
Without a ransom; he could go in peace
And was left free to wander where he would
On one condition, be it understood,
And the condition, to speak plain, went thus,
Agreed between Arcite and Theseus,
That if Arcite were ever to be found
Even for an hour, in any land or ground
Or country of Duke Theseus, day or night,
And he were caught, it would to both seem right
That he immediately should lose his head,
No other course or remedy instead.

Off went Arcite upon the homeward trek.
Let him beware! For he has pawned his neck.
What misery it cost him to depart!
He felt the stroke of death upon his heart,
He wept, he wailed. How piteously he cried
And secretly he thought of suicide.
He said, 'Alas the day that gave me birth!
Worse than my prison is the endless earth,
Now I am doomed eternally to dwell
Not in Purgatory, but in Hell.
Alas that ever I knew Perotheus!
For else I had remained with Theseus.
Fettered in prison and without relief
I still had been in bliss and not in grief.
Only to see her whom I love and serve,
Though it were never granted to deserve
Her favour, would have been enough for me.
O my dear cousin Palamon,' said he,
'Yours is the victory in this adventure.
How blissfully you serve your long indenture
In prison – prison? No, in Paradise!
How happily has Fortune cast her dice
For you! You have her presence, I the loss.
For it is possible, since your paths may cross
And you're a knight, a worthy one, and able,
That by some chance – for Fortune is unstable –
You may attain to your desire at last.
But I, that am an exile and outcast,
Barren of grace and in such deep despair
That neither earth nor water, fire nor air,
Nor any creature that is made of these
Can ever bring me help, or do me ease,
I must despair and die in my distress.
Farewell my life, my joy, my happiness!
'Alas, why is it people so dispraise
God's providence or Fortune and her ways,
That oft and variously in their scheme
Includes far better things than they could dream?

One man desires to have abundant wealth,
Which brings about his murder or ill-health;
Another, freed from prison as he'd willed,
Comes home, his servants catch him, and he's killed.
Infinite are the harms that come this way;
We little know the things for which we pray.
Our ways are drunkard ways – drunk as a mouse;
A drunkard knows quite well he has a house,
But how to get there puts him in a dither,
And for a drunk the way is slip and slither.
Such is our world indeed, and such are we.
How eagerly we seek felicity,
Yet are so often wrong in what we try!
Yes, we can all say that, and so can I,
In whom the foolish notion had arisen
That if I only could escape from prison
I should be well, in pure beatitude,
Whereas I am an exile from my good,
For since I may not see you, Emily,
I am but dead and there's no remedy.'
Now, on the other hand, poor Palamon,
When it was told him that Arcite had gone,
Fell in such grief, the tower where he was kept
Resounded to his yowling as he wept.
The very fetters on his mighty shins
Shine with his bitter tears as he begins,
'Alas, Arcite, dear cousin! In our dispute
And rivalry God knows you have the fruit.
I see you now in Thebes, our native city,
As free as air, with never a thought of pity
For me! You, an astute, determined man
Can soon assemble all our folk and clan
For war on Athens, make a sharp advance,
And by some treaty or perhaps by chance
She may become your lady and your wife
For whom, needs must, I here shall lose my life.
For, in the way of possibility,
As you're a prisoner no more, but free,

A Prince, you have the advantage to engage
In your affair. I perish in a cage,
For I must weep and suffer while I live
In all the anguish that a cell can give
And all the torment of my love, O care
That doubles all my suffering and despair.'
With that he felt the fire of jealousy start,
Flame in his breast and catch him by the heart
So madly that he seemed to fade and fail,
Cold as dead ashes, or as box-wood pale.
He cried, 'O cruel Gods, whose government
Binds all the world to your eternal bent,
And writes upon an adamantine table
All that your conclave has decreed as stable,
What more is man to you than to behold
A flock of sheep that cower in the fold?
For men are slain as much as other cattle,
Arrested, thrust in prison, killed in battle,
In sickness often and mischance, and fall,
Alas, too often for no guilt at all.
Where is right rule in your foreknowledge, when
Such torments fall on innocent, helpless men?
Yet there is more, for added to my load,
I am to pay the duties that are owed
To God, for Him I am to curb my will
In all the lusts that cattle may fulfil.
For when a beast is dead, he feels no pain,
But after death a man must weep again
That living has endured uncounted woe;
I have no doubt that it may well be so.
I leave the answer for divines to tell,
But that there's pain on earth I know too well.
'I have seen many a serpent, many a thief
Bring down the innocent of heart to grief,
Yet be at large and take what turn they will.
But I lie languishing in prison still.
Juno and Saturn in their jealous rage
Have almost quelled our Theban lineage;

Thebes stands in waste, her walls are broken wide.
And Venus slays me on the other side
With jealous fears of what Arcite is doing.'
Now I will turn a little from pursuing
Palamon's thoughts, and leave him in his cell,
For I have something of Arcite to tell.
The summer passes, and long winter nights
Double the miseries and appetites
Of lover in jail and lover free as air.
I cannot tell you which had most to bear.
To put it shortly, Palamon the pale
Lies there condemned to a perpetual jail,
Chained up in fetters till his dying breath;
Arcita is exiled on pain of death
For ever from the long-desired shore
Where lives the lady he will see no more.
You lovers, here's a question I would offer,
Arcite or Palamon, which had most to suffer?
The one can see his lady day by day,
But he must dwell in prison, locked away.
The other's free, the world lies all before,
But never shall he see his lady more.
Judge as you please between them, you that can,
For I'll tell on my tale as I began.

PART II

Now when Arcita got to Thebes again
Daylong he languished, crying out in pain
'Alas!' for never could he hope to see
His lady more. To sum his misery,
There never was a man so woe-begone,
Nor is, nor shall be while the world goes on.
Meat, drink and sleep – he lay of all bereft,
Thin as a shaft, as dry, with nothing left.
His eyes were hollow, grisly to behold,
Fallow his face, like ashes pale and cold,

And he went solitary and alone,
Wailing away the night and making moan;
And if the sound of music touched his ears
He wept, unable to refrain his tears.
So feeble were his spirits and so low,
And changed so much, one could not even know
Him by his voice; one heard and was in doubt.
And so for all the world he went about
Not merely like a lover on the rack
Of Eros, but more like a maniac
In melancholy madness, under strain
Of fantasy – those cells that front the brain.
Briefly, his love had turned him upside-down
In looks and disposition, toe to crown,
This poor distracted lover, Prince Arcite.
    But I shall take all day if I repeat
All that he suffered for the first two years,
In cruel torment and in painful tears
At Thebes, in his home-country, as I said.
Now as he lay one night asleep in bed
The winged god Mercury, he thought, came near
And stood before him, bidding him have good cheer.
His sleep-imbuing wand he held in air,
He wore a hat upon his golden hair,
Arrayed (Arcita noticed) in the guise
He wore when closing up the hundred eyes
Of Argus, and he said, 'You are to go
To Athens. There shall be an end to woe.'
He spoke; Arcita started and woke up.
'Truly, however bitter be my cup,
To Athens I will go at once!' he said,
'Nor will I change my purpose for the dread
Of death, for I will see her. I can die
Gladly enough, if she be standing by.'
    He rose and snatched a mirror from its place
And saw what change had come upon his face,
The colour gone, the features redesigned,
And instantly it came into his mind

That being so disfigured and so wan
From the long sickness he had undergone,
He might, if he assumed a humble tone,
Live out his life in Athens unbeknown
And see his lady almost every day.
So, on the spot, he doffed his lord's array,
And dressed as a poor labourer seeking hire.
Then all alone, except for a young squire,
Who knew the secret of his misery
And was disguised as wretchedly as he,
He went to Athens by the shortest way
And came to Court. And on the following day
Arcita proffered at the gate for hire
To do what drudgery they might require.
And briefly (there is little to explain)
He fell in service with a chamberlain
Who had his dwelling there with Emily.
The man was cunning and was quick to see
What work the servants did and which were good.
Arcite could carry water or hew wood,
For he was young and powerfully grown,
A tall young fellow too, and big of bone,
Fit to do any work that was ordained.
    Thus, for a year or two, Arcite remained
With Emily the bright, her page-of-state,
And gave it out his name was Philostrate.
And half so well beloved a man as he
There never was at Court, of his degree.
He was so much a gentleman by breed
He grew quite famous through the Court indeed,
And it would be a charitable notion
(They said) if Theseus offered him promotion
And put him to a service less despised
In which his virtues might be exercised.
Thus in a little while his fame had sprung
Both for good deeds and for a courteous tongue,
And Theseus took him and advanced him higher,
Made him his personal and chamber-squire,

And gave him money to maintain his station.
There came, moreover, men of his own nation
Secretly, year by year, and brought his dues.
He spent them cunningly, these revenues,
But honestly; none wondered at his wealth.
Three years went by in happiness and health;
He bore himself so well in peace and war
That there was no one Theseus valued more.
I leave him there in bliss, though bliss is brittle,
And turn to speak of Palamon a little.

In darkness horrible and prison tears
Poor Palamon has sat for seven years,
Pining away in sorrow and distress.
Who feels a two-fold grief and heaviness
But Palamon, whom love oppresses so
That he has lost his very wits for woe?
Added to which, he must lie prisoner there
Perpetually, not only for a year.

Who could make rhymes in English fit to vie
With martyrdom like that? Indeed, not I.
Let me pass lightly over it and say
It happened in the seventh year, in May,
The third of May (my ancient sources give
This detail in their fuller narrative),
Whether by accident or destiny,
For as events are shaped they have to be,
Soon after midnight, ere the sun had risen,
Helped by a friend, Palamon broke from prison
And fled the town as fast as he could go.
A drink had proved his jailer's overthrow,
A kind of honeyed claret he had fixed
With Theban opium and narcotics mixed.
The jailer slept all night; had he been shaken
He would have been impossible to waken.
So off runs Palamon as best he may.
The night was short and it was nearly day,
So it was necessary he should hide.
Into a grove that flanked the city's side

Palamon stalked with terror-stricken feet.
Here was, in his opinion, a retreat
In which he could conceal himself all day
And whence at nightfall he could make his way
On towards Thebes and rally at his back
A host of friends all eager to attack
Duke Theseus. He would either lose his life
Or conquer and win Emily to wife.
That was his whole intention, fair and plain.

I turn my story to Arcite again.
He little knew how close he was to care
Till Fortune brought him back into the snare.

The busy lark, the messenger of day,
Sings salutation to the morning grey,
And fiery Phoebus rising up so bright
Sets all the Orient laughing with the light,
And with his streams he dries the dewy sheaves
And silver droplets hanging on the leaves.
And now Arcita, at the royal court,
Principal squire to Theseus, seeking sport
Has risen from bed and greets the merry day.
Thinking to do observances to May,
And musing on the point of his desires
He rode a courser full of flickering fires
Into the fields for pleasure and in play
A mile or two from where the palace lay,
And to the very grove you heard me mention
He chanced to hold his course, with the intention
To make himself a garland. There he weaves
A hawthorn-spray and honeysuckle leaves
And sings aloud against the sunny sheen,
'O Month of May, with all thy flowers and green,
Welcome be thou, O fairest, freshest May,
Give me thy green, in hope of happy day!'

Quickly dismounting from his horse, he started
To thrust his way into the grove, light-hearted,
And roamed along the pathway, on and on,
Until he came by chance where Palamon

Crouched in a bush, scarce daring to draw breath
Lest he be seen, in deadly fear of death.
He little knew it was Arcite he heard,
It would have seemed incredible, absurd;
Yet there's a saying, known these many years:
Fields have their eyes, and forests have their ears.
It's well to be upon one's guard, I mean,
Since all day long we meet the unforeseen.
And little knew Arcite that there, beside him,
Palamon lay, with but a bush to hide him,
So close to him, and hearing all he said
But keeping still and silent as the dead.
Now when at last Arcite had roamed his fill
And sung his roundel with a lusty will
He felt a change of humour, for the nonce,
And fell into a study all at once,
As do these lovers in their quaint desires,
Now on the spray, now down among the briars,
Now up, now down, like buckets in a well,
Just as upon a Friday, truth to tell,
It shines one moment, and the next rains fast;
For thus can whimsical Venus overcast
The spirits of her folk, just as her day,
Friday is changeable, and so too are they,
Seldom is Friday like the rest of the week.
And, having sung, Arcite began to speak,
And sat him down, unutterably forlorn.
'Alas!' he said, 'the day that I was born!
How long, O Juno, in thy cruelty,
Wilt thou make war and bring to misery
The city of Thebes, and those that played the lion,
The royal blood of Cadmus and Amphion!
Cadmus, the first of men to win renown
By building Thebes, or first in laying down
Her strong foundations, first to be crowned her king;
And I that share his lineage, I that spring
By right descent out of the royal stock,
Have fallen captive and am made a mock,

Slave to my mortal enemy, no higher
Than a contemptible, a menial squire!
Yet Juno does me even greater shame;
I dare no more acknowledge my own name.
Time was Arcita was my name by right;
Now I'm called Philostrate, not worth a mite!
Alas, fell Mars! Ah, Juno, stern of face,
You have undone our lineage and our race
Save for myself and Palamon, who dwells
In martyrdom, poor wretch, in Theseus' cells.
On top of this, to slay me utterly,
The fiery dart of love so burningly
Thrusts through my faithful heart with deadly hurt!
My death was shaped for me before my shirt.
You kill me with your eyes, my Emily,
You are the cause that brings my death on me!
All the remainder of my cares and needs
I'd rate no higher than a mound of weeds
Could I but please or earn a grateful glance!'
And on the word he fell into a trance
A long, long time, then woke and moved apart.
Palamon felt a cleaving in his heart
As of a cold sword suddenly gliding through.
He quaked with anger; hiding would not do
Now that he'd listened to Arcita's tale,
And with a madman's face, extinct and pale,
He started up out of his bushy thicket
And cried, 'Arcita! Traitor! False and wicked,
Now you are caught that love my lady so,
For whom I suffer all this pain and woe,
And of my blood – sworn friend – for so we swore
As I have told you many times before,
And you have cheated Theseus with this game,
False as you are, of a pretended name!
Let it be death for you or death for me.
You shall not love my lady Emily.
I, no one else, will love her! Look and know
That I am Palamon your mortal foe.

And though I have no weapon in this place,
Having escaped from prison by God's grace,
I doubt it not you shall be slain by me
Or else yield up the love of Emily.
You shan't escape me, therefore choose your part!'
    Arcite, however, full of scorn at heart,
Knowing his face and hearing what he said,
Fierce as a lion drew his sword instead
And answered him, 'By God that sits above,
Were you not sick, and lunatic for love,
And weaponless moreover in this place,
You never should so much as take a pace
Beyond this grove, but perish at my hand.
And I denounce all covenants that stand
Or are alleged, as between you and me.
Fool that you are, remember love is free
And I will love her! I defy your might.
Yet, as you are an honourable knight
Willing by battle to decide your claim,
Tomorrow, by the honour of my name
I will not fail you, nor will make it known
To anyone. To-morrow, here, alone
You'll find me as a knight, and on my oath
I shall bring arms and harness for us both;
And you shall have the right of choosing first,
Taking the best and leaving me the worst.
I'll bring you meat and drink, let that be said,
Enough for you, and clothes to make your bed.
As for my lady, should you chance to win
And kill me in this thicket we are in,
Then you can have your lady, as for me.'
And Palamon gave answer, 'I agree.'
And thus they parted at the coppice-edge
Until the morning. Each had given pledge.
    O Cupid, Cupid, lost to charity!
O realm that brooks no fellow-king in thee!
Well is it said that neither love nor power
Admit a rival, even for an hour.

Arcite and Palamon had found that out.
    So back to town Arcite turned about,
And the next morning, ere the day was light,
He filched two suits of armour by a sleight,
Fully sufficient for the work in hand,
The battle in the fields, that they had planned.
Alone as at his birth Arcita rode
And carried all the armour in a load.
There in the grove where time and place were set
This Palamon and this Arcite are met.
    Then slowly changed the colour in each face
Just as when hunters in the realm of Thrace
That standing in the gap will poise a spear
And wait for bear or lion to appear,
Then hear him coming, breaking through the branches,
And hear the swish of leaves upon his haunches,
And think, 'Here comes my mortal enemy!
It's either death for him or death for me.
For either I must slay him at this gap
Or he slay me, if I should have mishap.'
Just so these knights changed colour when they met,
Knowing each other and the purpose set.
    There was no salutation, no 'Good day',
But without word or prelude straight away
Each of them gave his help to arm the other
As friendly as a brother with his brother;
And after that with spears of sharpened strength
They fought each other at amazing length.
You would have thought, seeing Palamon engage,
He was a lion fighting-mad with rage,
Arcite a cruel tiger, as they beat
And smote each other, or as boars that meet
And froth as white as foam upon the flood.
They fought till they were ankle-deep in blood.
And in this rage I leave them fighting thus
And turn once more to speak of Theseus.
    Now Destiny, that Minister-General
Who executes on earth and over all

What God, from everlasting, has foreseen,
Is of such strength, that though the world had been
Sure of the contrary, by Yea and Nay,
That thing will happen on a certain day,
Though never again within a thousand years.
And certainly our appetites and fears,
Whether in war or peace, in hate or love,
Are governed by a providence above.
  Thus must explain why mighty Theseus found
A sudden wish to hunt with horse and hound
Especially the hart in early May.
About his bed there never dawned a day
But he was up and ready dressed to ride
With horn and hound and hunter at his side.
Hunting to him was such a keen delight
It was his ruling joy and appetite
To be a stag's destroyer, for the stars
Ruled he should serve Diana after Mars.
  Clear was the day, as I have told ere this,
And Theseus, bathed in happiness and bliss,
With fair Hippolyta, his lovely Queen,
And Emily, who was arrayed in green,
Rode out to hunt; it was a royal band.
And to the coppice lying near at hand
In which a hart – or so they told him – lay,
He led his gathering by the shortest way.
And pressing on towards a glade in sight
Down which the hart most often took to flight
Over a brook and off and out of view,
The Duke had hopes to try a course or two
With certain hounds that he had singled out;
And when he reached the glade he looked about.
Glancing towards the sun he thereupon
Beheld Arcita fighting Palamon.
They fought like boars in bravery. There go
The shining swords in circle, to and fro,
So hideously that with their lightest stroke
It seemed as if they would have felled an oak.

What they could be he did not know, of course,
But he clapped spur at once into his horse
And, at a bound, he parted blow from blow,
And pulling out his sword he shouted, 'Ho!
No more on pain of death! Upon your head!
By mighty Mars, he is as good as dead
That dares to strike a blow in front of me!
Tell me, what sort of fellows may you be
That have the impudence to combat here
Without a judge or other overseer,
Yet as if jousting at a royal tilt?'
  Palamon answered quickly and in guilt,
'O Sir, what need of further word or breath?
Both of us have deserved to die the death,
Two wretched men, your captives, met in strife,
And each of them encumbered with his life.
If to judge righteously has been your fashion,
Show neither of us mercy nor compassion,
And kill me first for holy charity!
But kill my fellow too, the same as me.
Or kill him first, for little though you know,
This is Arcita and your mortal foe,
Banished by you on forfeit of his head,
For which alone he merits to be dead.
This is the man that waited at your gate
And told you that his name was Philostrate.
This is the man that mocked you many a year,
And you have made him chief equerry here.
This is the man who dares love Emily.
Now, since my day of death has come to me,
I will make full confession and go on
To say I am that woeful Palamon
That broke out of your jail feloniously.
And it is I, your mortal enemy,
That am in love with Emily the Bright
And glad to die this moment in her sight.
And so I ask for judgement and for death;
But slay my fellow in the self-same breath,

Since we have both deserved that we be slain!'
And noble Theseus answered back again,
'This is a short conclusion. It shall stand.
Your own confession damns you out of hand.
I shall record your sentence as it stood;
There needs no torturing to make it good.
Death you shall have, by mighty Mars the Red!'
On hearing this, the Queen began to shed
Her womanly tears, and so did Emily
And all the ladies in the company.
It seemed so very piteous to them all
That ever such misfortune should befall
For they were noblemen of great estate
And love the only cause of their debate.
They saw their bloody gashes gaping wide
And, from the greatest to the least, they cried,
'Have mercy, Lord, upon us women all!'
Down on their knees they then began to fall,
Ready to kiss his feet as there he stood.
Abated in the end his angry mood;
Pity runs swiftly in a noble heart.
Though he had quaked with anger at the start
He had reflected, having time to pause,
Upon their trespass and upon its cause,
And though his anger at their guilt was loth
To pardon either, reason pardoned both.
For thus he argued: almost any man
Will help himself to love, if so he can,
And anyone will try to break from prison;
And then compassion in his heart had risen
Seeing these ladies weeping there together,
And in his noble heart he wondered whether
He should not show his clemency, and 'Fie,'
He thought, 'on lords who show no mercy! why,
To be a lion both in word and deed
To a penitent in fear, is not to heed
His change of heart, and equal him with one
Proudly persisting in an evil done.

A lord will lack discretion among his graces
Who does not make distinction in such cases,
But weighs humility and pride as one.'
And, to be brief, his anger being done,
His eyes began to sparkle and uncloud
And having taken thought he said aloud:
'The God of Love! Ah, *Benedicite*!
How mighty and how great a lord is he!
No obstacles for him make any odds;
His miracles proclaim his power a God's.
Cupid can make of every heart and soul
Just what he pleases, such is his control.
Look at Arcita here and Palamon!
Both had escaped scot-free and could have gone
To Thebes and lived there royally; they know
That I have ever been their mortal foe;
Their lives are mine, they can make no defence;
Yet Cupid in the teeth of common sense
Has brought them here to die in melancholy!
Consider, is it not the height of folly?
What is so foolish as a man in love?
Look at them both! By God that sits above
See how they bleed! Are they not well arrayed?
Thus has their lord, the God of Love, repaid
Their services; these are his fees and wages!
And yet, in spite of that, they pose as sages,
These devotees of Love, as I recall.
But still this is the finest stroke of all,
That she, the cause of all these jolly pranks,
Has no more reason to return them thanks
Than I, and knows no more of this affair,
By God, than does a cuckoo or a hare!
Well, well, try anything once, come hot, come cold!
If we're not foolish young, we're foolish old.
I long have known myself what Love can do,
For, in my time, I was a lover too.
And therefore, knowing something of love's pain,
How violently it puts a man to strain,

As one so often caught in the same snare
I readily forgive the whole affair,
Both at the Queen's request, that on her knees
Petitions, and my sister Emily's.
But you shall swear to me and give your hands
Upon it never to attack my lands,
Or levy war on me by night or day,
But be my friends in everything you may.
I pardon you your fault. You are forgiven.'
They swore as he had asked, and, having striven
To gain his patronage and further grace,
Were satisfied, and Theseus summed the case:
'So far as riches go, and nobleness,
Were she a queen in question, or princess,
You would be worthy when the moment came,
Either of you, to marry. All the same,
Speaking as for my sister Emily,
The cause of all your strife and jealousy,
You are aware yourselves that she can never
Wed both at once, though you should fight for ever.
And one of you, come joy to him or grief,
Must go pipe tunes upon an ivy-leaf;
That is to say she cannot have you both,
However jealous you may be, or loth.
And so, to put the matter in good order,
Let Destiny herself be your Awarder,
And shape your fortune. Listen to the close,
For here is the solution I propose.
'My will is this, to make a flat conclusion
And end all counterpleading and confusion,
(And you will please to take it for the best)
That each shall take his freedom, east or west,
And without ransom or constraint of war;
And, a year later, neither less nor more,
Each shall return, bringing a hundred knights,
Armed for the lists and everything to rights,
Ready by battle to decide his claim
To Emily. To this I give my name,

My faith and honour, as I am a knight.
Whichever of you proves of greater might,
Or, more precisely, whether you or he,
Backed by the hundred knights allowed by me,
Can drive his foe to stake, or take his life,
To him I shall give Emily to wife,
To whom kind Fortune gives so fair a grace.
I'll build the lists upon this very place,
And God in wisdom deal my soul its due
As I shall prove an even judge and true.
There is no other way, let that be plain;
One of you must be taken or else slain.
And if this seems to you to be well said,
Think yourselves lucky, sirs, and nod your head.
That's the conclusion I've decided on.'
Who looks delighted now but Palamon?
And who springs up rejoicing but Arcite?
And who could tell, what poetry repeat
The joy of all those present in the place
That Theseus had vouchsafed so fair a grace?
Down on their knees went everyone in sight
Returning thanks with all their heart and might,
Especially the Thebans, time on time.
Thus in good hope, with beating heart a-climb,
Each took his leave, and they began to ride
To Thebes and to her ancient walls and wide.

PART III

I judge it would be held for negligence
If I forgot to tell of the dispense
Of money by the Duke who set about
To make the lists a royal show throughout.
A theatre more noble in its plan
I dare well say was never seen by man.
It had a circuit of a mile about,
Well walled with stone; there was a ditch without.

Shaped like a circle there it stood complete
In tier on tier, the height of sixty feet,
So that a man set in a given row
Did not obstruct his neighbour from below.
    Eastward there stood a gate of marble white,
And westward such another rose to sight;
Briefly, there never was upon the face
Of earth so much within so small a space.
No craftsmen in the land that had the trick
Of pure geometry, arithmetic,
Portraiture, carving and erecting stages,
But Theseus found him and supplied his wages
To build this theatre and carve devices.
And, to observe due rites and sacrifices,
Eastward he built upon the gate, above,
An oratory to the Queen of Love,
To Venus and her worship, and he dressed
An altar there; and like it, to the west,
In reverence to Mars he built a second;
The cost in gold was hardly to be reckoned.
Yet, northward, in a turret on the wall
He built a third, an oratory tall
And rich, of whitest alabaster, set
With crimson coral, to discharge the debt
Of worship to Diana of Chastity.
And it was thus that Theseus built these three
Temples in great magnificence of style.
    But yet I have forgotten all this while
To tell you of the portraits that there were,
The shapes, the carvings and the figures there
To grace these temples high above the green.
    First, in the temple of Venus, you had seen
Wrought on the wall, and piteous to behold,
The broken sleeps and sighings manifold,
The sacred tears and the lamenting songs
And every fiery passion that belongs
To those that suffer love, the long-endured,
Their taken oaths, their covenants assured,

Pleasure and Hope, Desire, Foolhardiness,
Beauty and Youth, Lasciviousness, Largesse,
Philtres and Force, Falsehood and Flattery,
Extravagance, Intrigue and Jealousy
Gold-garlanded, with many a yellow twist,
That had a cuckoo sitting on her wrist.
Stringed instruments, and carols, feasts and dances,
Joy and display, and all the circumstances
Of love, as I have told you and shall tell
Were in due order painted there as well,
And more than I can mention or recount.
Truly the whole of Citherea's Mount,
Where Venus has her dwelling above all
Her other playgrounds, figured on the wall
With all her garden in its joyful dress.
Nor was forgotten her porter, Idleness,
Nor yet Narcissus, beauty's paragon
In times gone by, nor doting Solomon,
Nor the unmastered strength of Hercules.
Medea and her enchantments next to these,
And Circe's too, and Turnus fierce and brave,
And rich King Croesus, captive and a slave,
That men might see that neither wit nor wealth,
Beauty or cunning, bravery or health
Can challenge Venus or advance their worth
Against that goddess who controls the earth.
And all these people captured in her noose
Cried out, 'Alas!' but it was little use.
Suffice these few examples, but the score
Could well be reckoned many thousands more.
    Her statue, glorious in majesty,
Stood naked, floating on a vasty sea,
And from the navel down there were a mass
Of green and glittering waves as bright as glass.
In her right hand a cithern carried she
And on her head, most beautiful to see,
A garland of fresh roses, while above
There circles round her many a flickering dove.

Cupid her son was standing to behold her
Fronting her statue, winged on either shoulder,
And he was blind, as it is often seen;
He bore a bow with arrows bright and keen.
Why should I not go on to tell you all
The portraiture depicted on the wall
Within the Temple of Mighty Mars the red?
The walls were painted round and overhead
Like the recesses of that grisly place
Known as the Temple of Great Mars in Thrace,
That frosty region under chilling stars
Where stands the sovereign mansion of King Mars.
First on the walls a forest with no plan
Inhabited by neither beast nor man
Was painted – tree-trunks, knotted, gnarled and old,
Jagged and barren, hideous to behold,
Through which there ran a rumble and a soughing
As though a storm should break the branches bowing
Before it. Downwards from a hill there went
A slope; the Temple of Armipotent
Mars was erected there in steel, and burnished.
The Gateway, narrow and forbidding, furnished
A ghastly sight, and such a rushing quake
Raged from within, the portals seemed to shake.
In at the doors a northern glimmer shone
Onto the walls, for windows there were none;
One scarce discerned a light, it was so scant.
The doors were of eternal adamant,
And vertically clenched, and clenched across
For greater strength with many an iron boss,
And every pillar to support the shrine
Weighed a full ton of iron bright and fine.
And there I saw the dark imaginings
Of felony, the stratagems of kings,
And cruel wrath that glowed an ember-red,
The pick-purse and the image of pale Dread,
The smiler with the knife beneath his cloak,
The out-houses that burnt with blackened smoke;

Treason was there, a murder on a bed,
And open war, with wounds that gaped and bled;
Dispute, with bloody knife and snarling threat;
A screaming made the place more dreadful yet.
The slayer of himself, I saw him there
With all his heart's blood matted in his hair;
The driven nail that made the forehead crack,
Cold Death, with gaping mouth, upon its back.
And in the middle of the shrine Mischance
Stood comfortless with sorry countenance.
There I saw madness cackling his distress,
Armed insurrection, outcry, fierce excess,
The carrion in the undergrowth, slit-throated,
And thousands violently slain. I noted
The raping tyrant with his prey o'ertaken,
The levelled city, gutted and forsaken,
The ships on fire dancingly entangled,
The luckless hunter that wild bears had strangled,
The sow, munching the baby in the cradle,
The scalded cook, in spite of his long ladle –
Nothing forgotten of the unhappy art
Of Mars: the carter crushed beneath his cart,
Flung to the earth and pinned beneath the wheel;
Those also on whom Mars has set his seal,
The barber and the butcher and the smith
Who forges things a man may murder with.
And high above, depicted in a tower,
Sat Conquest, robed in majesty and power,
Under a sword that swung above his head,
Sharp-edged and hanging by a subtle thread.
And Caesar's slaughter stood in effigy
And that of Nero and Mark Antony;
Though to be sure they were as yet unborn,
Their deaths were there prefigured to adorn
This Temple with the menaces of Mars,
As is depicted also in the stars
Who shall be murdered, who shall die for love;
Such were the portraits on the walls above.

Let these examples from the past hold good,
For all I cannot reckon, though I would.
The statue of Mars was in a cart, and clad
In armour, grim and staring, like the mad,
Above his head there shone with blazing looks
Two starry figures, named in ancient books,
Puella one, the other Rubeus.
The God of Battles was encompassed thus:
There stood a wolf before him at his feet,
His eyes glowed red, he had a man to eat.
Subtle the pencil was that told this story
Picturing Mars in terror and in glory.
To the temple of Diana, now, the Chaste,
I briefly turn, for I will use what haste
I can in trying to describe it all.
Here there were many paintings on the wall
Of hunting and of shamefast chastity.
There I perceived the sad Callisto, she
Whom in her rage Diana did not spare
But changed her from a woman to a bear,
Then to a star, and she was painted so
(She is the lode-star, that is all I know;
Her son, too, is a star, as one can see).
There I saw Dana, turned into a tree*
(No, not Diana, she was not the same,
But Penneus' daughter, Dana was her name).
I saw Actaeon turned into a stag;
This was Diana's vengeance, lest he brag
Of having seen her naked. There they show him
Caught and devoured – his own hounds did not know him.
Close by there was a painting furthermore
Of Atalanta hunting a wild boar,
And Meleager; there were others too
Diana chose to harry and undo,
And many other wonders on the wall
Were painted, that I need not now recall.
High on a stag the Goddess held her seat,
And there were little hounds about her feet;

Below her feet there was a sickle moon,
Waxing it seemed, but would be waning soon.
Her statue bore a mantle of bright green,
Her hand a bow with arrows cased and keen;
Her eyes were lowered, gazing as she rode
Down to where Pluto has his dark abode.
A woman in her travail lay before her,
Her child unborn; she ceased not to implore her
To be delivered and with piteous call
Cried, 'Help, Lucina, thou the best of all!'
It was a lively painting, every shade
Had cost the painter many a florin paid.
So now the lists were made, and Theseus
Who, at huge cost, had bidden them produce
These temples in a theatre so stately,
Saw it was finished, and it pleased him greatly.
No more of Theseus now; I must pass on
To speak of Arcite and of Palamon.
The day approached for trial of their rights
When each should bring with him a hundred knights
To settle all by battle, as I said;
So, back to Athens each of them had led
His hundred knights, all helmeted and spurred
And armed for war. They meant to keep their word.
And it was said indeed by many a man
That never since the day the world began
In all God's earth, wide seas and reach of land,
Had so few men made such a noble band
As in respect of knighthood and degree.
Everyone with a taste for chivalry
And keen (you bet!) to win a glorious name
Had begged to be allowed to join the game.
Lucky the man to whom they gave the word!
And if, tomorrow, such a thing occurred
You know quite well that every lusty knight
Who loved the ladies and had strength to fight,
Whether in England here, or anywhere,
Would wish – you cannot doubt it – to be there.

Fight for a lady? *Benedicite!*
That would be something for a man to see.
And that was just the case with Palamon.
With him there rode his comrades – many a one;
Some were in coat of mail and others wore
A breastplate and a tunic, little more.
Some carried heavy plating, front and back,
And some a Prussian shield to ward attack;
Some cased their legs in armour, thigh to heel,
Some bore an axe and some a mace of steel
– There's never a new fashion but it's old –
And so they armed themselves as I have told.
Each man according to his own opinion.
You might have seen arrive from his dominion
Mighty Lycurgus, famous King of Thrace;
Black was his beard and manly was his face.
To see the circling eye-balls of the fellow
Set in his head and glowing red and yellow!
And like a gryphon he would stare and rouse
The shaggy hair upon his beetling brows.
Huge were his limbs, his muscles hard and strong,
His back was broad, his bulging arms were long.
True to his country's custom from of old
He towered in a chariot of gold
And four white bulls were harnessed in the traces.
Over his armour, which in many places
Was studded with bright nails of yellow gold,
He wore a coal-black bear-skin, fold on fold,
Instead of surcoat, and behind his back
His fell of hair was combed and shone as black
As raven's feather, and a golden wreath,
Thick as your arm, weighted the head beneath.
It was immensely heavy, and was bright
With many precious stones of fiery light,
With finest rubies and with diamonds.
About his chariot, white enormous hounds,
Twenty and more, each larger than a steer,
And trained to hunt the lion and the deer,

Went following him. Their muzzles were fast bound;
Their collars were of gold with rings set round.
He had a hundred nobles in his rout
Armed to the teeth; their hearts were stern and stout.
And with Arcita, so the poets sing,
Went great Emetrius the Indian king
On a bay steed whose trappings were of steel
Covered in cloth of gold from haunch to heel
Fretted with diaper. Like Mars to see,
His surcoat was in cloth of Tartary,
Studded with great white pearls; beneath its fold
A saddle of new-beaten, burnished, gold.
He had a mantle hanging from his shoulders,
Which, crammed with rubies, dazzled all beholders.
His hair was crisped in ringlets, as if spun
Of yellow gold, and glittered like the sun.
Aquiline nose and eyes with lemon light
And rounded lips he had, his colour bright,
With a few freckles sprinkled here and there,
Some yellow and some black. He bore an air
As of a lion when he cast a glance.
He was some twenty-five years old, to chance
A guess at it; a healthy beard was springing.
His voice resounded like a trumpet ringing.
He had a wreath of laurel on his head
For he was freshly, greenly garlanded.
And on his hand he bore for his delight
An eagle; it was tame and lily-white.
He had a hundred lords beside him there,
In all their armour (though their heads were bare)
And sumptuously decked with furnishings.
For take my word for it that dukes and kings
Were gathered in this noble company
For love and for the spread of chivalry.
Many a lion tame and spotted pard
Gambolled about this king of stern regard.
And in this manner in their fine adorning
These lords came to the city on Sunday morning,

Round about nine o'clock, and lighted down.
The noble Theseus led them through his town
(So it became him as a duke and knight),
And housed them each according to his right.
He feasted them and took great pains to please,
To honour and to set them all at ease,
And to this day it's said no human wit
However lofty could have bettered it.
What minstrelsy, what service at the feast,
What gifts bestowed on greatest as on least,
How richly decked the palace, what the place
Ordained for first and last upon the dais,
What ladies loveliest in the dancing throng,
And which most exquisite in dance and song
And which to speak most feelingly of love,
Or what the falcons that were perched above,
And what the hounds that couched upon the floor –
Of all such questions I shall say no more
Than the result of it; I will not tease you,
Here comes the point, so listen if it please you.
That Sunday night ere day began to spring
There was a lark which Palamon heard sing
(Although two hours before the day came on,
Yet the lark sang, and so did Palamon).
With holy heart and in a lofty mood
He rose on pilgrimage and he pursued
His path to Citherea, the benign
And blissful Venus, to her honoured shrine.
And in her hour, among the early mists,
He stepped towards her Temple in the lists
And down he knelt in humbleness and fear
With aching heart, and said as you shall hear:
'Fairest of Fair, O Venus, Lady mine,
Consort of Vulcan, Daughter of Jove Divine,
Giver of joy upon the heights above
The Mount of Citherea, by that love
Thou gavest to Adonis, heal my smart
And take my humble prayer into thy heart.

Alas! I have no language that can tell
The ravages and torments of my hell,
Which heart is all unable to convey,
And I am so confused I cannot say
More than: "O Lady bright, that art aware
Of all my thought and seest my despair,
Consider this, have pity on my pain
As I shall ever struggle to maintain
Thy service, in so far as it shall be
Within my power to combat chastity."
This is my vow, if only thou wilt help!
I am not one of those who brag and yelp
Of victory, nor ask for it tomorrow,
Or for renown; I neither beg nor borrow
Vainglorious praise, nor do I make profession
Of prowess – but would fully have possession
Of Emily, and die thy worshipper.
Choose Thou the means for this, administer
The ways, I care not how, whether it be
By my defeat of them, or theirs of me,
So that I have my lady in my arms.
Though Mars be god of battles and alarms
Thy power is so great in Heaven above
That if thou please I well may have my love.
And I will worship at thy shrine for ever;
Ride where I may, to thee my whole endeavour
Shall be in sacrifice and kindling fires
Upon thy altars. Yet if my desires,
Sweet lady, cannot please thee, end my sorrow
With death upon Arcita's spear to-morrow.
I shall not care when I have lost my life
Though he should win my Emily to wife.
This is the sum and purpose of my prayer,
Give me my love, sweet Goddess ever fair!'
When Palamon had done his orison
He then did sacrifice with woe-begone
Devotion and with ceremonial rite
More than I now have leisure to recite.

And in the end the statue of Venus shook
And made a sign; and by that sign he took
His prayer had been accepted on that day,
For though the sign had hinted a delay
He knew for certain that his boon was granted,
And home he went at once, his soul enchanted.
  In the third hour after Palamon
Had sought out Venus for his orison,
Up rose the sun, and up rose Emily
And hastened to Diana's sanctuary,
Taking such maidens as she might require,
And they were ready furnished with the fire,
The incense and the vestments and a throng
Of other necessaries that belong
To sacrifices, horns of brimming mead,
As was the custom, all that they could need.
The Temple smoked and the adornments there
Glittered in beauty. Emily the fair
Joyfully washed her body in a well,
But how she did her rite I dare not tell
Save in a general way, though I for one
Think that to hear the detail would be fun.
If one means well why bother to feel queasy?
It's good for people to be free and easy.
Her shining hair untressed upon her cloak
They combed and set a crown of cerrial oak
Green on her golden head with fitting grace.
Two fires she kindled in the proper place
And did her rites, as he will find who looks
In Statius' *Book of Thebes* and other books,
And when the fires were kindled she drew near
With piteous heart, and prayed as you shall hear:
  'O Goddess Chaste of all the woodlands green,
That seest earth and heaven and sea, O Queen
Of Pluto's kingdom, dark and deep below,
Goddess of virgins that from long ago
Hast known my heart, and knowest my desire,
As I may shun the vengeance of thine ire

Such as upon Actaeon once was spent,
Thou knowest well, O chaste omnipotent,
That I would be a virgin all my life
And would be neither mistress, no, nor wife.
I am, thou knowest, of thy company,
A huntress, still in my virginity,
And only ask to walk the woodlands wild,
And not to be a wife or be with child,
Nor would I know the company of man.
O help me, Goddess, for none other can,
By the three Forms that ever dwell in thee,*
And as for Palamon who longs for me
And for Arcita's passion, I implore
This favour of thy grace and nothing more;
Set them in amity and let them be
At peace, and turn their hearts away from me.
Let all their violent loves and hot desires,
Their ceaseless torments and consuming fires,
Be quenched, or turned towards another place.
Yet if thou wilt not do me so much grace,
Or if my destiny ordains it so
That one shall have me whether I will or no,
Then send me him that shall desire me most.
Clean Goddess of the chaste and virgin host,
Look down upon the bitter tears that fall
Upon my cheeks, O keeper of us all,
Keep thou my maidhood, prosper my endeavour,
And while I live a maid I'll serve thee ever.'
  The fires flamed up upon the altar fair
And clear while Emily was thus in prayer;
But all at once she saw a curious sight,
For suddenly one fire quenched its light
And then rekindled; as she gazed in doubt
The other fire as suddenly went right out;
As it was quenched it made a whistling sound
As of wet branches burning on the ground.
Then, from the faggot's tip, there ran a flood
Of many drops that had the look of blood.

Now at the sight she was so terrified
It almost drove her from her wits, she cried,
Not knowing what it was to signify,
For it was fear alone that made her cry,
She wept and it was pitiful to hear.
And then began Diana to appear,
With bow in hand, garbed as a Huntcress,
And said, 'My daughter, cease your heaviness.
For thee the Gods on high have set their term,
And by eternal word and writ confirm
That thou shalt be espoused to one of those
That have for thee endured so many woes.
But unto which of them I may not tell.
Longer I cannot tarry, fare thee well.
And yet the fires of sacrifice that glow
Upon my altar shall, before thou go,
Make plain thy destiny in this for ever.'
And on the word the arrows in her quiver
Clattered together and began to ring
And forth she went and made a vanishing.
Wholly amazed at what had come to pass,
Emily thought, 'What can this mean? Alas!
O take me, take me under thy protection,
Diana, for I yield to thy direction!'
Then she went homeward by the shortest way
And that was all, there is no more to say.
Now in the hour of Mars next after this
Arcite rose up and sought the edifice
Of fiery Mars, to do beneath his banner
His sacrifice, as was the pagan manner,
In high devotion with a piteous heart,
And thus he said his orison apart:
'O thou strong God of War that art adored
In the cold realms of Thrace and held for Lord,
That hast of every monarchy and land
Of warlike men the bridle in thine hand,
And dealest them their fortunes by thy choice,
Accept my sacrifice and hear my voice.

And if my youth be such as to deserve
Thy favour, if my strength be fit to serve
Thy godhead, if I may be one of thine,
I pray thee then, pity this pain of mine.
'By that same suffering and burning fire
That long ago consumed thee with desire,
Having in use the incomparable flesh
Of fair free-hearted Venus, young and fresh,
Holding her in thine arms and at thy will,
– Albeit that once the time was chosen ill,
Seeing that Vulcan caught thee in his net
And found thee lying with his wife – but yet
By all the pain and passion of thy heart
Pity me too that suffer the same smart!
Thou knowest I am ignorant and young
And, as I think, more passionately stung
By love than any creature dead or living;
Little she thinks, in all the grief she's giving,
Of me, or cares whether I swim or sink,
And well I know ere she can learn to think
Kindly of me that force must have its place,
And well I know without thy help or grace
The little strength I have is all too slight;
Then help me, Lord, tomorrow, in the fight,
Not only for the flames that burnt in thee
But for the fire that now is burning me.
Grant victory tomorrow to my sword!
Mine be the labour, thine the glory, Lord;
Thy sovereign temple I will honour above
All other places, it shall be my love
To work for thy delight, to use thy arts,
And hang my banner, yea, my heart of hearts
Above thy altar. All my Company
Shall do the same for ever, there shall be
Eternal fires burning before thy Shrine.
Nay, further to this binding vow of mine,
My beard and hair, whose length and excellence
Has never suffered yet from the offence

Of razor or of shear, to Thee I give,
And I'll be thy true servant while I live.
Now, Lord, have pity on a heart so sore;
And give me victory, I ask no more.'
His prayer was over, and the rings that hung
Upon the portals of the Temple swung;
So did the doors and clattered far and near,
At which Arcita felt the touch of fear.
The fires blazed, the altar glistened bright,
So that the Temple was suffused with light,
A scented air rose upward from the ground.
Arcita lifted up his hand and found
More incense and he cast it on the flame
With other rituals. At last the frame
Of mighty Mars began to shake and ring
Its hauberk, and he heard a murmuring,
Low-voiced and dim, that answered '*Victory*';
And giving thanks and glorifying he,
Filled with the joyful hope that he would win,
Returned at once and went to seek his inn,
As happy as a bird is of the sun.
Immediately an uproar was begun
Over this granted boon in Heaven above
As between Venus, fairest Queen of Love,
And the armipotent Mars; it did not cease,
Though Jupiter was busy making peace,
Until their father Saturn, pale and cold,
Who knew so many stratagems of old,
Searched his experience and found an art
To please the disputants on either part.
Age has a great advantage over youth
In wisdom and by custom, that's the truth.
The old may be out-run but not out-reasoned.
And Saturn stopped their argument and seasoned
Their fears, although it's not his nature to,
And found a remedy for this to-do.
'My dearest daughter Venus,' said old Saturn,
'My heavenly orbit marks so wide a pattern

It has more power than anyone can know;
In the wan sea I drown and overthrow,
Mine is the prisoner in the darkling pit,
Mine are both neck and noose that strangles it,
Mine the rebellion of the serfs astir,
The murmurings, the privy poisoner;
And I do vengeance, I send punishment,
And when I am in *Leo* it is sent.
Mine is the ruin of the lofty hall,
The falling down of tower and of wall
On carpenter and mason, I their killer.
'Twas I slew Samson when he shook the pillar;
Mine are the maladies that kill with cold,
The dark deceits, the stratagems of old;
A look from me will father pestilence.
Then weep no more, for by my diligence
This Palamon, your dedicated knight,
Shall have his lady, as you swore he might.
Though Mars should help his champion, none the less
Peace must be made between you soon, I guess,
Although you do not share the same complexions;
That is what brings these daily insurrections.
I am your grandfather and, as before,
I'll do my best to please you; weep no more.'
Now I shall cease to speak of Gods above,
Of angry Mars and Venus Queen of Love,
And tell you all, as plainly as I can,
The grand result for which I first began.

PART IV

Great was the festival they held that day
In Athens, and the lusty time of May
Put everyone so well in countenance
They spent all Monday at a joust and dance
And the high services of Venus. Yet
Because they knew that up they'd have to get,

And early too, to witness the great fight,
They went to bed betimes on Monday night.
  Next morning when the day began to spring
Clattering horse and noise of harnessing
Echoed through all the hostelries about.
Up to the palace cantered rout on rout
Of lords on palfreys, stallions, many a steed;
And what device of harness too indeed,
So rich and so outlandish, what a deal
Of goldsmith work, embroidery and steel!
Bright shields and trappings, headpieces and charms,
Great golden helmets, hauberks, coats of arms,
Lords on apparelled coursers, squires too
And knights belonging to their retinue,
Spears being nailed and helmets buckled strong,
Strapping of shields and lacing up of thong,
The work was urgent, not a man was idle.
The foamy steeds gnawing the golden bridle,
The armourers up and down and round about
Racing with file and hammer through the rout,
Yeomen on foot and commonalty come
With pipe and clarion, trump and kettle-drum,
Armed with short sticks and making such a rattle
It sounded like the blast of bloody battle.
The palace full of people up and down,
Here three, there ten, in all the talk of town
And making bets about the Theban knights.
Says one, 'He'll win'; another, 'Not by rights';
Some backed the man whose beard was black and squared,
Some backed the skin-heads, some the shaggy-haired;
Said one, 'There's a grim fellow, I'll be bound
He'll fight, his battle-axe weighs twenty pound!'
And prophecy went seething round the hall
Long after day had risen on them all.
  Great Theseus was awoken out of sleep
By minstrelsy and noise about the keep,
But kept his chamber – a resplendent room –
Till the two Theban knights, to both of whom

An equal honour was done, were brought in presence.
  Throned in a window giving on a pleasance
Sat Theseus like a god in panoply,
And all the people crowded there to see
The Duke and offer him their reverence
And hear what orders he might issue thence.
A herald on a scaffold shouted 'Ho!'
Till all the noise was quieted below;
Seeing at last the people hushed and still
He thus declared the mighty Theseus' will:
  'Our Lord the Duke has in his high discretion
Considered the destruction and suppression
Of gentle blood, were he to jeopardize
The lives of those engaging under guise
Of mortal battle. Wishing none to die,
His Grace now purposes to modify
His ordinance. On forfeit of your lives
No cross-bow darts, no poleaxes or knives
May pass into the lists or be conveyed
Thither, no stabbing-sword with pointed blade
Be drawn or even carried at the side.
Further, no pair of combatants shall ride
More than one course with spears, descending thence
To thrust on foot only in self-defence.
If any man be injured, none shall take
His life; he shall be carried to the stake
That is to be ordained on either side,
And there conveyed by force he shall abide.
And should the principal of either faction
Be taken to the stake, or killed in action,
All fighting shall determine thereupon.
God speed you all, go forward and lay on!
With mace and long-sword you may fight your fill.
Now go your ways. This is his Grace's will.'
  The people rifted heaven with a shout
Of merriest good humour, crying out,
'God bless our Duke for doing what he can
To save the blood of many a gentleman!'

Up go the trumpets and the melody,
Forth to the lists canter the company,
As they were bidden, to the city verge;
The streets were hung in cloth-of-gold, not serge.
And like a lord the Duke began to ride,
With him a Theban knight, on either side.
Behind them rode the Queen and Emily,
And behind them another company
Of one or other according to their rank,
Threading through the city with the clank
Of hoof and armour to the lists that lay
Beyond. It was not fully prime of day
When Theseus took his seat in majesty.
Hippolyta the Queen and Emily
Were with him, other ladies ranked about,
And round the scaffoldage a seething rout.
And westward, look! Under the Martian Gate
Arcita and his hundred knights await,
And now, under a banner of red, march on.
And at the self-same moment Palamon
Enters by Venus' Gate and takes his place
Under a banner of white, with cheerful face.
You had not found, though you had searched the earth,
Two companies so equal in their worth.
Never were two so splendidly arrayed
And there was none so wise as to have weighed
Which of them had the advantage of his foe
In valiance, age, degree or strength of show;
They were so equal one could only guess.
In two formations they began to dress
And when the roll was called that all might see
Their number was not swelled by treachery,
The gates were shut, and then the herald cried:
'Young knights, now do your duty, show your pride!'
The heralds then withdrew, their work was done;
Out blared the trumpet and the clarion.
There is no more to say, but east and west
In go the spears in readiness, at the 'rest',

In go the spurs into the horse's side.
It's easy seeing which can joust and ride.
There the shafts shiver on the shields so thick;
One through his breast-bone feels the thrust and prick.
Up spring the spears to twenty foot in height,
Out go the long-swords flashing silver-bright,
Hewing the helmets as they shear and shred;
Out bursts the blood in streams of sternest red,
The mighty maces swing, the bones are bashed,
One thrusting through the thickest throng has crashed,
There the strong steeds have stumbled, down goes all,
Man under foot and rolling like a ball.
Another on his feet with truncheon pound
Hurtles a rider and his horse to ground;
One's wounded in the body, whom they take,
Spite of his teeth, and bear him to the stake
As was ordained, and there he has to stay;
One more is carried off the other way.
From time to time the Duke decrees a rest
To drink and be refreshed as they think best.
Many a time our Thebans in the flow
Of battle met and did each other woe,
And each unhorsed the other. There could be
No tiger in the vale of Galgophy
Raging in search after a stolen cub
So cruel as Arcite with spear and club
For jealousy of heart to Palamon.
No lion is so fierce to look upon
In all Benamarin, and none so savage
Being hunted, nor so hunger-mad in ravage
For blood of prey as Palamon for Arcite.
The blows upon their helmets bite and beat
And the red blood runs out on man and steed.
There comes at last an end to every deed,
And ere into the west the sun had gone
Strong King Emetrius took Palamon
As he was fighting with Arcite, still fresh,
And made his sword bite deeply in his flesh;

It asked the strength of twenty men to take
The yet-unyielded Palamon to stake.
Seeking a rescue, King Lycurgus coursed
Towards Palamon but was himself unhorsed,
And King Emetrius for all his strength
Was flung out of the saddle a sword's length
By Palamon's last stroke in sweeping rake.
But all for nought, they brought him to the stake;
Nothing could help, however hard he fought,
His hardy heart must stay there, he was caught
By force and by the rules decided on.
  Who clamours now in grief but Palamon
That may no more go in again and fight?
And when the noble Theseus saw this sight
He rose and thundered forth to every one,
'Ho! Stop the fight! No more, for it is done!
I will be true judge and no partisan.
The Theban Prince Arcita is the man
And shall have Emily, won by Fortune's grace.'
  A tumult of rejoicing filled tall space
From every throat in such a caterwaul
It seemed as if the very lists would fall.
  What now can lovely Venus do above?
What is she saying, hapless Queen of Love?
Wanting her will her eyes were filled with mists
And shining tears fell down upon the lists.
  She cried, 'I am disgraced and put to shame!'
But Saturn said, 'Peace, daughter, watch the game.
Mars has his will, his knight has had his boon,
But, by my head, it shall be your turn soon.'
  The trumpeters with loudest minstrelsy
And the shrill heralds shouting frenziedly
Were in high joy for honour of Arcite.
But listen quietly and keep your seat,
See what a miracle happened thereupon!
  The fierce Arcita, with no helmet on,
Riding his courser round to show his face
Cantered the whole length of the jousting-place,

Fixing his eye on Emily aloft;
And her returning gaze was sweet and soft,
For women, speaking generally, are prone
To follow Fortune's favours, once they're known.
She was his whole delight, his joy of heart.
  Out of the ground behold a fury start,
By Pluto sent at the request of Saturn.
Arcita's horse in terror danced a pattern
And leapt aside and foundered as he leapt,
And ere he was aware Arcite was swept
Out of the saddle and pitched upon his head
Onto the ground, and there he lay for dead;
His breast was shattered by the saddle-bow.
As black he lay as any coal or crow
For all the blood had run into his face.
Immediately they bore him from the place
Sadly to Theseus' palace. What avail
Though he was carved out of his coat of mail
And put to bed with every care and skill?
Yet he was still alive, and conscious still,
And calling ceaselessly for Emily.
  Theseus, attended by his company,
Came slowly home to Athens in full state
Of joyous festival, no less elate
For this misfortune, wishing not to cast
A gloom upon them all for what had passed.
Besides they said Arcita would not die,
He would recover from his injury.
And then there was another thing that filled
All hearts with pleasure, no one had been killed,
Though some were badly hurt among the rest,
Especially the man with stoven breast.
As for the other wounds and broken arms
Some produced salves and some relied on charms,
Herb pharmacies and sage to make them trim;
They drank them off, hoping to save a limb.
  For such as these Duke Theseus did his best,
He comforted and honoured every guest

And ordered revelry to last the night
For all the foreign princes, as was right.
None were discouraged or in discontent;
It was a jousting, just a tournament.
Why should they be discouraged? After all,
It's only an accident to have a fall.
There is no shame in being borne by force,
Unyielded, to the stake by twenty horse,
Alone, with none to help – it must be so,
Harried away by arm and foot and toe,
And on a horse maddened by sticks and noise,
By men on foot, by yeomen and their boys –
There's nothing despicable in all this;
No one could ever call it cowardice.
And therefore Theseus made proclamation
To stop all rancour, grudge and emulation,
That each side was as valorous as the other
And both as like as brother is to brother.
He gave them gifts, to each in his degree,
And for three days they held festivity.
Then he conveyed the Kings in solemn state
Out of his city, far beyond the gate,
And home went everyone by various ways
With no more than 'Good-bye!' and 'Happy days!'

The battle done with, I may now go on
To speak of poor Arcite and Palamon.
Up swells Arcita's breast, the grievous sore
About his heart increases more and more;
The clotting blood, for all the doctor's skill,
Corrupts and festers in his body still,
That neither cupping, bleeding at a vein
Or herbal drink can make him well again.
The expulsive forces, known as 'animal',
Had lost their power to cleanse the 'natural'
Of poison, and it could not be expelled.*
His lungs began to choke, the vessels swelled.
Clotted was every muscle of his chest
By poison and corruption in his breast.

Nor could he profit, in his will to live,
By upward vomit or by laxative.
All, all was shattered and beyond repair,
Nature no longer had dominion there,
And certainly, where nature will not work,
Physic, farewell! Go, bear the man to kirk!
This is the sum of all, Arcite must die.

And so he sent for Emily to be by,
And Palamon, the cousin of his heart,
And thus he spoke, preparing to depart:

'Nothing of all the sorrows in my breast
Can now declare itself or be expressed
To you, O lady that I love the most;
But I bequeath the service of my ghost
To you, above all creatures in the world,
Now that my life is done, and banner furled.
Alas the woe! Alas the pain, so strong,
That I have suffered for you, and so long!
Alas, O Death! Alas, my Emily!
Alas the parting of our company!
Alas, my heart's own queen, alas, my wife,
O lady of my heart that ends my life!
What is this world? What does man ask to have?
Now with his love, now in his cold, cold grave,
Alone, alone, with none for company!
Farewell, my sweetest foe, my Emily!
O softly take me in your arms, I pray,
For love of God, and hearken what I say.

'I have here, with my cousin Palamon,
Had strife and rancour many a day now gone,
For love of you, and for my jealousy.
And may Jove's wisdom touch the soul in me,
To speak of love and what its service means
Through all the circumstances and the scenes
Of life, namely good faith and knightly deed,
Wisdom, humility and noble breed,
Honour and truth and openness of heart,
For, as I hope my soul may have its part

With Jove, in all the world I know of none
So worthy to be loved as Palamon,
Who serves you and will serve you all his life.
And should you ever choose to be a wife,
Forget not Palamon, that great-hearted man.'
  Speech failed in him, the cold of death began
Its upward creeping from his feet to numb
The breast, and he was slowly overcome,
And further still as from his arms there went
The vital power; all was lost and spent.
Only the intellect, and nothing more,
That dwelt within his heart, so sick and sore,
Began to falter when the heart felt death.
Dusked his two eyes at last and failed his breath,
And yet he gazed at her while he could see
And his last word was 'Mercy . . . Emily!'
His spirit changed its house and went away
Where I came never – where I cannot say,
And so am silent. I am no divine.
Souls are not mentioned in this tale of mine,
I offer no opinion, I can tell
You nothing, though some have written where they dwell.
Arcite is cold. Mars guide him on his way!
Something of Emily I have to say.
  Palamon howls and Emily is shrieking,
And Theseus leads away his sister, seeking
To bear her from the corpse; she faints away.
Why tarry on her tears or spend the day
Telling you how she wept both eve and morrow?
For in these cases women feel such sorrow
When it befalls their husbands to be taken
The greater part seem utterly forsaken
And fall into a sickness so extreme
That many of them perish, it would seem.
  Infinite were the sorrows and the tears
Of older folk and those of tender years
Throughout the town, all for this Theban's death.
Wept man and boy, and sure a wilder breath

Of lamentation never had been heard
Since Hector, freshly slaughtered, was interred
In Troy. Alas to see the mourning there,
The scrabbled faces, the dishevelled hair!
'Must you have died?' the women wailed. 'For see,
Had you not gold enough – and Emily?'
  No one could lighten Theseus of his care
Except his father, old Aegeus, there.
He knew the transmutations of the world
And he had seen its changes as it whirled
Bliss upon sorrow, sorrow upon bliss,
And gave his son instruction upon this:
  'Just as there never died a man,' said he,
'But had in life some station or degree,
Just so there never lived a man,' he said,
'In all the world but in the end was dead.
This world is but a thoroughfare of woe
And we are pilgrims passing to and fro.
Death is the end of every worldly sore.'
On top of this he said a great deal more
To this effect, with wisest exhortation,
Heartening the people in their tribulation.
  In time the thoughts of Theseus were astir
To find a site and build a sepulchre
For good Arcite, and how it best might be
Ordained to fit his honour and degree.
And in the end the place decided on
Was where Arcite first met with Palamon
In battle for their love, and there between
The branches in that very grove of green
Where he had sung his amorous desire
In sad complaint, and felt love hot as fire,
He planned a fire to make, in funeral
Observances, and so accomplish all.
So he commanded them to hack and fell
The ancient oak-trees and to lay them well
In rows and bundles faggoted to burn.
  Forth ride his officers and soon return

On swiftest foot with his commandments done.
And after this, Theseus appointed one
To fetch a bier and had it fitly clad
In cloth-of-gold, the finest that he had.
And in the self-same cloth he clad Arcite
And on his hands white gauntlets, as was meet,
He placed, and on his head a laurel crown
And in his hand the sword of his renown.
He laid him, bare his face, upon the bier,
And wept upon him, pity was to hear.
And that his body might be seen by all,
When it was day he bore him to the hall
That roared with mourning sounds in unison.
  Then came that woeful Theban, Palamon,
With fluttering beard and ash-besprinkled hair,
In sable garments stained with many a tear.
Yet, passing all in weeping, Emily
Was the most sorrowful of the company.
And that the service to be held might be
The nobler, more befitting his degree,
Duke Theseus commanded them to bring
Three steeds, all trapped in steel and glittering,
And mantled with the arms of Prince Arcite.
Upon these huge white steeds that paced the street
On these rode one who bore Arcita's shield,
A second bore the spear he used to wield;
His Turkish bow and quiver of burnished gold
Was given to the third of them to hold;
Slowly they paced, their countenances drear,
Towards the destined grove, as you shall hear.
Upon the shoulders of the noblest men
Among the Greeks there came the coffin then.
Their eyes were red with tears, their slackened feet
Paced through the city by the master-street;
The way was spread with black, and far on high
Black draperies hung downwards from the sky.
  The old Aegeus to the right was placed
With Theseus on his left, and so they paced

Bearing gold vessels of a rare design
Brimming with honey and milk, with blood and wine;
And then came Palamon with his company,
And after that came woeful Emily
With fire in her hand, the custom then
Used in the obsequies of famous men.
  High was the labour, rich was the attire
And service, at the making of the fire
That reached to heaven in a cone of green.
The arms were twenty fathoms broad – I mean
The boughs and branches heaped upon the ground –
And straw in piles had first been loaded round.
  But how they made the funeral fires flame,
Or what the trees by number or by name
– Oak, fir-tree, birch, aspen and poplar too,
Ilex and alder, willow, elm and yew,
Box, chestnut, plane, ash, laurel, thorn and lime,
Beech, hazel, whipple-tree – I lack the time
To tell you, or who felled them, nor can tell
How their poor gods ran up and down the dell
All disinherited of habitation,
Robbed of their quiet and in desolation,
The nymph and dryad of the forest lawn,
The hamadryad and the subtle faun,
These I pass over, birds and beasts as well
That fled in terror when the forest fell;
Nor shall I say how in the sudden light
Of the unwonted sun the dell took fright,
Nor how the fire first was couched in straw,
Then in dry sticks thrice severed with a saw,
Then in green wood with spice among the stems
And then in cloth-of-gold with precious gems
And many a flower-garland in the stir
Of breathing incense and the scent of myrrh;
Nor how Arcita lay among it all,
Nor of the wealth and splendour of his pall,
Nor yet how Emily thrust in the fire
As custom was and lit the funeral pyre,

Nor how she fainted when they fed the flame,
Nor what she said or thought; and I shall name
None of the jewels that they took and cast
Into the fire when it flamed at last,
Nor shall I tell how some threw shield and spear,
Or what their garments, by the burning bier,
Nor of the cups of wine and milk and blood
That others poured upon the fiery flood,
Nor tell you how the Greeks in mighty rout
Left-handedly went thrice and thrice about
The flaming pyre, and shouted as they drove,
And thrice they clashed their spears about the grove;
Nor yet relate how thrice the ladies wept
Nor who supported Emily and kept
Pace with her homeward, nor shall it be told
How Prince Arcita burnt to ashes cold;
Nor how the wake was held in the delight
Of funeral games that lasted all the night.
What naked wrestler, glistening with oil,
Made the best showing in his dangerous toil
I will not say, nor say how one by one
They all went home after the games were done;
But shortly to the point; for I intend
To bring my long narration to an end.

In course of time, and after certain years,
Mourning had been accomplished and their tears
Were shed no more, by general consent.
And then it seems they held a parliament
At Athens touching certain points and cases;
And among these they dealt with certain places
With which to form alliances abroad
To keep the Thebans fully overawed,
And noble Theseus ordered thereupon
That summons should be sent for Palamon.

Not knowing for what reason ordered back,
And still in melancholy suit of black,
Palamon came on this authority
In haste. Then Theseus sent for Emily.

When all were seated there and hushed the place,
The noble Duke kept silent for a space
And ere he spoke the wisdom in his breast
He let his eyes fall where it pleased him best.
Then with a sober visage and the still
Sound of a sigh, he thus expressed his will:

'The First Great Cause and Mover of all above
When first He made that fairest chain of love,
Great was the consequence and high the intent.
He well knew why He did, and what He meant.
For in that fairest chain of love He bound
Fire and air and water and the ground
Of earth in certain limits they may not flee.
And that same Prince and Mover then,' said he,
'Stablished this wretched world, appointing ways,
Seasons, durations, certain length of days,
To all that is engendered here below,
Past which predestined hour none may go,
Though they have power to abridge those days.
I need not quote authority or raise
More proof than what experience can show,
But give opinion here from what I know.

'Since we discern this order, we are able
To know that Prince is infinite and stable.
Anyone but a fool knows, in his soul,
That every part derives from this great whole.
For nature cannot be supposed to start
From some particular portion or mere part,
But from a whole and undisturbed perfection
Descending thence to what is in subjection
To change, and will corrupt. And therefore He
In wise foreknowledge stablished the decree
That species of all things and the progression
Of seed and growth continue by succession
And not eternally. This is no lie,
As any man can see who has an eye.

'Look at the oak; how slow a tree to nourish
From when it springs until it comes to flourish!

It has so long a life, and yet we see
That in the end it falls, a wasted tree.
'Consider too how hard the stone we tread
Under our feet! That very rock and bed
On which we walk is wasting as it lies.
Time will be when the broadest river dries
And the great cities wane and last descend
Into the dust, for all things have an end.
'For man and woman we can plainly see
Two terms appointed so it needs must be
– That is to say, the terms of youth and age.
For every man will perish, king and page,
Some in their beds and some in the deep sea,
And some upon the battle-field, maybe.
There is no help for it, all take the track,
For all must die and there is none comes back.
'Who orders this but Jupiter the King,
The Prince and Cause of all and everything,
Converting all things back into the source
From which they were derived, to which they course?
And against this no creature here alive
Whatever his degree may hope to strive.
'Then hold it wise, for so it seems to me,
To make a virtue of necessity,
Take in good part what we may not eschew,
Especially whatever things are due
To all of us; his is a foolish soul
That's rebel against Him who guides the whole,
And it is honour to a man whose hour
Strikes in his day of excellence and flower,
When he is certain of his own good name
And never known in any act of shame.
And gladder should a friend be of his death
Where there is honour in the yielded breath,
Gladder than for a name by age made pale,
And all forgotten the heroic tale.
Then is the time, if you would win a name,
To die, upon the moment of your fame.

'The contrary of this is wilfulness;
Why do we murmur? Where is the distress
If good Arcite, the flower of chivalry,
Is gone in honour and in duty, free
Of the foul prison of this life?
Shall those he loved, his cousin and his wife,
Murmur against his welfare, or suppose
He can return them thanks? Not he, God knows.
Offending so against him, they offend
Themselves, and are no happier in the end.
'So what conclusion can I draw from this
Except that after grief there should be bliss
And praise to Jupiter for all his grace?
So, ere we make departure from this place,
I rule that of two sorrows we endeavour
To make one perfect joy, to last for ever.
Then let us look, and where we find herein
The greatest grief let happiness begin.
'Sister,' he said, 'it has my full assent,
And is confirmed by this my parliament,
That gentle Palamon, your own true knight,
Who loves and serves you, heart and soul and might,
And always has since first he saw your face,
Shall move you to feel pity, gain your grace
And so become your husband and your lord.
Give me your hand, for this is our award.
Let us now see your womanly compassion.
By God, he's a king's nephew! Were his fashion
No more than that of a knight-bachelor,
What with the years he served and suffered for
Your love (unless his sufferings deceive me)
He would be worth considering, believe me.
A noble mercy should surpass a right.'
And then he said to Palamon the knight,
'I think there needs but little sermoning
To gain your own assent to such a thing.
Come near, and take your lady by the hand.'
And they were joined together by the band

That is called matrimony, also marriage,
By counsel of the Duke and all his peerage.
And thus with every bliss and melody
Palamon was espoused to Emily,
And God that all this wide, wide world has wrought,
Send them his love, for it was dearly bought!
Now Palamon's in joy, amid a wealth
Of bliss and splendour, happiness and wealth.
He's tenderly beloved of Emily
And serves her with a gentle constancy,
And never a jealous word between them spoken
Or other sorrow in a love unbroken.
Thus ended Palamon and Emily,
And God save all this happy company!
Amen.

THE MILLER'S TALE

Words between the Host and the Miller

When we heard the tale the Knight had told,
Not one among the pilgrims, young or old,
But said it was indeed a noble story
Worthy to be remembered for its glory,
And it especially pleased the gentlefolk.
Our Host began to laugh and swore in joke:
'It's going well, we've opened up the bale;
Now, let me see. Who'll tell another tale?
Upon my soul the game has begun well!
Come on, Sir Monk, if you've a tale to tell,
Repay the Knight a little for his tale!'
The Miller, very drunk and rather pale,
Was straddled on his horse half-on half-off
And in no mood for manners or to doff

His hood or hat, or wait on any man,
But in a voice like Pilate's he began*
To huff and swear. 'By blood and bones and belly,
I've got a noble story I can tell 'ee,
I'll pay the Knight his wages, not the Monk.'
Our Host perceived at once that he was drunk
And said, 'Now hold on, Robin, dear old brother;
We'll get some better man to tell another;
You wait a bit. Let's have some common sense.'
'God's soul, I won't!' said he. 'At all events
I mean to talk, or else I'll go my way.'
Our Host replied, 'Well, blast you then, you may.
You fool! Your wits have gone beyond recall.'
'Now listen,' said the Miller, 'one and all,
To what I have to say. But first I'm bound
To say I'm drunk, I know it by my sound.
And if the words get muddled in my tale
Just put it down to too much Southwark ale.
I will relate a legend and a life
Of an old carpenter and of his wife,
And how a student came and set his cap . . .'
The Reeve looked up and shouted, 'Shut your trap!
Give over with your drunken harlotry.
It is a sin and foolishness,' said he,
'To slander any man or bring a scandal
On wives in general. Why can't you handle
Some other tale? There's other things beside.'
To this the drunken Miller then replied,
'My dear old brother Oswald, such is life.
A man's no cuckold if he has no wife.
For all that, I'm not saying you are one;
There's many virtuous wives, all said and done,
Ever a thousand good for one that's bad,
As well you know yourself, unless you're mad.
Why are you angry? What is this to-do?
I have a wife, God knows, as well as you,
Yet not for all the oxen in my plough
Would I engage to take it on me now

To think myself a cuckold, just because . . .
I'm pretty sure I'm not and never was.
One shouldn't be too inquisitive in life
Either about God's secrets or one's wife.
You'll find God's plenty all you could desire;
Of the remainder, better not enquire.'
What can I add? The Miller had begun,
He would not hold his peace for anyone,
But told his churl's tale his own way, I fear.
And I regret I must repeat it here,
And so I beg of all who are refined
For God's love not to think me ill-inclined
Or evil in my purpose. I rehearse
Their tales as told, for better or for worse,
For else I should be false to what occurred.
So if this tale had better not be heard,
Just turn the page and choose another sort;
You'll find them here in plenty, long and short;
Many historical, that will profess
Morality, good breeding, saintliness.
Do not blame me if you should choose amiss.
The Miller was a churl, I've told you this,
So was the Reeve, and other some as well,
And harlotry was all they had to tell.
Consider then and hold me free of blame;
And why be serious about a game?

The Miller's Tale

Some time ago there was a rich old codger
Who lived in Oxford and who took a lodger.
The fellow was a carpenter by trade,
His lodger a poor student who had made
Some studies in the arts, but all his fancy
Turned to astrology and geomancy,
And he could deal with certain propositions
And make a forecast under some conditions

About the likelihood of drought or showers
For those who asked at favourable hours,
Or put a question how their luck would fall
In this or that, I can't describe them all.
This lad was known as Nicholas the Gallant,
And making love in secret was his talent,
For he was very close and sly, and took
Advantage of his meek and girlish look.
He rented a small chamber in the kip
All by himself without companionship.
He decked it charmingly with herbs and fruit
And he himself was sweeter than the root
Of liquorice, or any fragrant herb.
His astronomic text-books were superb,
He had an astrolabe to match his art
And calculating counters laid apart
On handy shelves that stood above his bed.
His press was curtained coarsely and in red;
Above there lay a gallant harp in sight
On which he played melodiously at night
With such a touch that all the chamber rang;
It was *The Virgin's Angelus* he sang,
And after that he sang *King William's Note*,
And people often blessed his merry throat.
And that was how this charming scholar spent
His time and money, which his friends had sent.
This carpenter had married a new wife
Not long before, and loved her more than life.
She was a girl of eighteen years of age.
Jealous he was and kept her in the cage,
For he was old and she was wild and young;
He thought himself quite likely to be stung.
He might have known, were Cato on his shelf,
A man should marry someone like himself;
A man should pick an equal for his mate.
Youth and old age are often in debate.
However, he had fallen in the snare,
And had to bear his cross as others bear.

She was a fair young wife, her body as slender
As any weasel's, and as soft and tender;
She used to wear a girdle of striped silk;
Her apron was as white as morning milk
Over her loins, all gusseted and pleated.
White was her smock; embroidery repeated
Its pattern on the collar, front and back,
Inside and out; it was of silk, and black.
The tapes and ribbons of her milky mutch
Were made to match her collar to a touch;
She wore a broad silk fillet, rather high,
And certainly she had a lecherous eye.
And she had plucked her eyebrows into bows,
Slenderly arched they were, and black as sloes;
And a more truly blissful sight to see
She was than blossom on a cherry-tree,
And softer than the wool upon a wether;
And by her girdle hung a purse of leather,
Tasselled with silk and silver droplets, pearled;
If you went seeking up and down the world,
The wisest man you met would have to wrench
His fancy to imagine such a wench;
And her complexion had a brighter tint
Than a new florin from the Royal Mint.
As to her song, it was as loud and quick
As any swallow's chirping on a rick;
And she would skip or play some game or other
Like any kid or calf behind its mother.
Her mouth was sweet as mead or honey – say
A hoard of apples lying in the hay.
Skittish she was, and jolly as a colt,
Tall as a mast and upright as a bolt
Out of a bow. Her collaret revealed
A brooch as big as boss upon a shield.
High shoes she wore, and laced them to the top.
She was a daisy, O a lollypop
For any nobleman to take to bed
Or some good man of yeoman stock to wed.

Now, gentlemen, this gallant Nicholas
One day began to romp and make a pass
At this young woman, in a mood of play,
Her husband being out, down Osney way.
Students are sly, and giving way to whim,
He made a grab and caught her by the quim
And said, 'Unless I have my will of you
I'll die of secret love – O, darling, do!'
Then held her haunches hard and gave a cry
'O love-me-all-at-once or I shall die!'
She gave a spring, just like a skittish colt
Boxed in a frame for shoeing, and with a jolt
Managed in time to wrench her head away,
And said, 'Give over, Nicholas, I say!
No, I won't kiss you! Stop it! Let me go
Or I shall scream! I'll let the neighbours know!
Where are your manners? Take away your paws!'
Then Nicholas began to plead his cause
And spoke so fair in proffering what he could
That in the end she promised him she would,
Swearing she'd love him, with a solemn promise
To be at his disposal, by St Thomas,
When she could spy an opportunity.
'My husband is so full of jealousy,
Unless you watch your step and hold your breath
I know for certain it will be my death,'
She said, 'So keep it well under your hat.'
'Oh, never mind about a thing like that.'
Said he; 'A scholar doesn't have to stir
His wits so much to trick a carpenter.'
And so they both agreed to it, and swore
To watch their chance, as I have said before.
When things were settled thus as they thought fit,
And Nicholas had stroked her loins a bit
And kissed her sweetly, he took down his harp
And played away, a merry tune and sharp.
It happened later she went off to church,
This worthy wife, one holiday, to search

Her conscience and to do the works of Christ.
She put her work aside and she enticed
The colour to her face to make her mark;
Her forehead shone. There was a parish clerk
Serving the church, whose name was Absalon.
His hair was all in golden curls and shone;
Just like a fan it strutted outwards, starting
To left and right from an accomplished parting.
Ruddy his face, his eyes as grey as goose,
His shoes cut out in tracery, as in use
In old St Paul's. The hose upon his feet
Showed scarlet through, and all his clothes were neat
And proper. In a jacket of light blue,
Flounced at the waist and tagged with laces too,
He went, and wore a surplice just as gay
And white as any blossom on the spray.
God bless my soul, he was a merry knave!
He knew how to let blood, cut hair and shave,
And draw up legal deeds; at other whiles
He used to dance in twenty different styles
(After the current school at Oxford though,
Casting his legs about him to and fro).
He played a two-stringed fiddle, did it proud,
And sang a high falsetto, rather loud;
And he was just as good on the guitar.
There was no public-house in town, or bar,
He didn't visit with his merry face
If there were saucy barmaids round the place.
He was a little squeamish in the matter
Of farting, and satirical in chatter.
This Absalon, so jolly in his ways,
Would bear the censer round on holy days
And cense the parish women. He would cast
Many a love-lorn look before he passed,
Especially at this carpenter's young wife;
Looking at her would make a happy life
She was so neat, so sweet, so lecherous!
And I dare say if she had been a mouse

And he a cat, she'd have been pounced upon.
In taking the collection Absalon
Would find his heart was set in such a whirl
Of love, he would take nothing from a girl,
For courtesy, he said, it wasn't right.
That evening, when the moon was shining bright
He ups with his guitar and off he tours
On the look-out for any paramours.
Larky and amorous, away he strode
Until he reached the carpenter's abode
A little after cock-crow, took his stand
Beside the casement window close at hand
(It was set low upon the cottage-face)
And started singing softly and with grace,
'Now dearest lady, if thy pleasure be
In thoughts of love, think tenderly of me!'
On his guitar he plucked a tuneful string.
This carpenter awoke and heard him sing
And turning to his wife said, 'Alison!
Wife! Do you hear him? There goes Absalon
Chanting away under our chamber wall.'
And she, 'Yes, John, God knows I hear it all.'
If she thought more of it she didn't tell.
So things went on. What's better than 'All's well'?
From day to day this jolly Absalon,
Wooing away, became quite woe-begone;
He lay awake all night, and all the day,
Combed his thick locks and tried to pass for gay,
Wooed her by go-between and wooed by proxy,
Swore to be page and servant to his doxy,
Trilled and rouladed like a nightingale,
Sent her sweet wine and mead and spicy ale,
And wafers piping hot and jars of honey,
And, as she lived in town, he offered money.*
For there are some a money-bag provokes
And some are won by kindness, some by strokes.
Once, in the hope his talent might engage,
He played the part of Herod on the stage.

What was the good? Were he as bold as brass,
She was in love with gallant Nicholas;
However Absalon might blow his horn
His labour won him nothing but her scorn.
She looked upon him as her private ape
And held his earnest wooing all a jape.
There is a proverb, true, as you may find,
That *Out-of-Sight* is also *Out-of-Mind.*
For Nigh-and-Sly has the advantage there;
And, much as Absalon might tear his hair,
And rage at being seldom in her sight,
Nicholas, nigh and sly, stood in his light.
Now, show your paces, Nicholas you spark!
And leave lamenting to the parish clerk.

And so it happened that one Saturday.
When the old carpenter was safe away
At Osney, Nicholas and Alison
Agreed at last in what was to be done.
Nicholas was to exercise his wits
On her suspicious husband's foolish fits,
And, if so be the trick worked out all right,
She then would sleep with Nicholas all night,
For such was his desire and hers as well;
And even quicker than it takes to tell,
Young Nicholas, who simply couldn't wait,
Went to his room on tip-toe with a plate
Of food and drink, enough to last a day
Or two, and Alison was told to say,
In case her husband asked for Nicholas,
That she had no idea where he was,
And that she hadn't set eyes on him all day
And thought he must be ill, she couldn't say;
And more than once the maid had given a call
And shouted but no answer came at all.

So it continued, all that Saturday
Without a sound from Nicholas, who lay
Upstairs, and ate or slept as pleased him best
Till Sunday when the sun went down to rest.

This foolish carpenter was lost in wonder
At Nicholas; what could have got him under?
He said, 'I can't help thinking, by the Mass,
Things can't be going right with Nicholas.
What if he took and died? God guard his ways!
A ticklish place the world is, nowadays.
I saw a corpse this morning borne to kirk
That only Monday last I saw at work.
Run up,' he told the serving-lad, 'be quick,
Shout at his door, or knock it with a brick.
Take a good look and tell me how he fares.'

The serving-boy went sturdily upstairs,
Stopped at the door and, standing there, the lad
Shouted away and, hammering like mad,
Cried, 'Ho! What's up? Hi! Master Nicholay!
How can you lie up there asleep all day?'

But all for nought, he didn't hear a soul.
He found a broken panel with a hole
Right at the bottom, useful to the cat
For creeping in by: so he looked through that,
And, in the end, he saw him through the crack.
This Nicholas lay gaping on his back
As if he'd caught a glimpse of the new moon.
Down went the boy and told his master soon
About the state in which he found the man.

On hearing this the carpenter began
To cross himself and said, 'St Frideswide bless us!
We little know what's coming to distress us.
The man has fallen, with this here "astromy",
Into a fit, or lunacy maybe.
I always thought that was how it would go.
God has some secrets that we shouldn't know.
How blessed are the simple, aye, indeed,
That only know enough to say their creed!
Happened just so with such another student
Of astromy and he was so imprudent
As to stare upwards while he crossed a field,
Busy foreseeing what the stars revealed;

And what should happen but he fell down flat
Into a marl-pit. He didn't foresee that!
But by the Saints we've reached a sorry pass;
I can't help worrying for Nicholas.
He shall be scolded for his studying
If I know how to scold, by Christ the King!
Get me a staff to prise against the floor.
Robin, you put your shoulder to the door.
We'll shake the study out of him, I guess!'
The pair of them began to heave and press
Against the door. Happened the lad was strong
And so it didn't take them very long
To heave it off its hinges; down it came.
Still as a stone lay Nicholas, with the same
Expression, gaping upwards into air.
The carpenter supposed it was despair
And caught him by the shoulders mightily,
Shook him and shouted with asperity:
'What, Nicholas! Hey! Look down! Is that a fashion
To act? Wake up and think upon Christ's passion.
I sign you with the cross from elves and sprites!'
And he began the spell for use at nights
In all four corners of the room and out
Across the threshold too and round about:
Jesu Christ and Benedict sainted
Bless this house from creature tainted,
Drive away night-hags, white Pater-noster,
Where did you go, St Peter's soster?
And in the end the dandy Nicholas
Began to sigh, 'And must it come to pass?'
He said, 'Must all the world be cast away?'
The carpenter replied, 'What's that you say?
Put trust in God as we do, working men.'
Nicholas answered, 'Fetch some liquor then,
And afterwards, in strictest secrecy,
I'll speak of something touching you and me,
But not another soul must know, that's plain.'
This carpenter went down and came again

Bringing some powerful ale – a largish quart.
When each had had his share of this support
Young Nicholas got up and shut the door
And, sitting down beside him on the floor,
Said to the carpenter, 'Now, John, my dear,
My excellent host, swear on your honour here
Not to repeat a syllable I say,
For here are Christ's intentions, to betray
Which to a soul puts you among the lost,
And vengeance for it at a bitter cost
Shall fall upon you. You'll be driven mad!'
'Christ and His holy blood forbid it, lad!'
The silly fellow answered. 'I'm no blab,
Though I should say it. I'm not given to gab.
Say what you like, for I shall never tell
Man, woman or child by Him that harrowed Hell!'*
'Now, John,' said Nicholas, 'believe you me,
I have found out by my astrology,
And looking at the moon when it was bright,
That Monday next, a quarter way through night,
Rain is to fall in torrents, such a scud
It will be twice as bad as Noah's Flood.
This world,' he said, 'in just about an hour,
Shall all be drowned, it's such a hideous shower,
And all mankind, with total loss of life.'
The carpenter exclaimed, 'Alas, my wife!
My little Alison! Is she to drown?'
And in his grief he very near fell down.
'Is there no remedy,' he said, 'for this?'
'Thanks be to God,' said Nicholas, 'there is,
If you will do exactly what I say
And don't start thinking up some other way.
In wise old Solomon you'll find the verse
"Who takes advice shall never fare the worse,"
And so if good advice is to prevail
I undertake with neither mast nor sail
To save her yet, and save myself and you.
Haven't you heard how Noah was saved too

When God forewarned him and his sons and daughters
That all the world should sink beneath the waters?'
'Yes,' said the carpenter, 'a long time back.'
'Haven't you heard,' said Nicholas, 'what a black
Business it was, when Noah tried to whip
His wife (who wouldn't come) on board the ship?
He'd have been better pleased, I'll undertake,
With all that weather just about to break,
If she had had a vessel of her own.
Now, what are we to do? We can't postpone
The thing; it's coming soon, as I was saying,
It calls for haste, not preaching or delaying.
'I want you, now, at once, to hurry off
And fetch a shallow tub or kneading-trough
For each of us, but see that they are large
And such as we can float in, like a barge.
And have them loaded with sufficient victual
To last a day – we only need a little.
The waters will abate and flow away
Round nine o'clock upon the following day.
Robin the lad mayn't know of this, poor knave,
Nor Jill the maid, those two I cannot save.
Don't ask me why; and even if you do
I can't disclose God's secret thoughts to you.
You should be satisfied, unless you're mad,
To find as great a grace as Noah had.
And I shall save your wife, you needn't doubt it,
Now off you go, and hurry up about it.
'And when the tubs have been collected, three,
That's one for her and for yourself and me,
Then hang them in the roof below the thatching
That no one may discover what we're hatching.
When you have finished doing what I said
And stowed the victuals in them overhead,
Also an axe to hack the ropes apart,
So, when the water rises, we can start,
And, lastly, when you've broken out the gable,
The garden one that's just above the stable,

So that we may cast free without delay
After the mighty shower has gone away,
You'll float as merrily, I undertake,
As any lily-white duck behind her drake.
And I'll call out, "Hey, Alison! Hey, John!
Cheer yourselves up! The flood will soon be gone."
And you'll shout back, "Hail, Master Nicholay!
Good morning! I can see you well. It's day!"
We shall be lords for all the rest of life
Of all the world, like Noah and his wife.
'One thing I warn you of; it's only right.
We must be very careful on the night,
Once we have safely managed to embark,
To hold our tongues, to utter no remark,
No cry or call, for we must fall to prayer.
This is the Lord's dear will, so have a care.
'Your wife and you must hang some way apart,
For there must be no sin before we start,
No more in longing looks than in the deed.
Those are your orders. Off with you! God speed!
To-morrow night when everyone's asleep
We'll all go quietly upstairs and creep
Into our tubs, awaiting Heaven's grace.
And now be off. No time to put the case
At greater length, no time to sermonize;
The proverb says, "Say nothing, send the wise."
You're wise enough, I do not have to teach you.
Go, save our lives for us, as I beseech you.'
This silly carpenter then went his way
Muttering to himself, 'Alas the day!'
And told his wife in strictest secrecy.
She was aware, far more indeed than he,
What this quaint stratagem might have in sight,
But she pretended to be dead with fright.
'Alas!' she said. 'Whatever it may cost,
Hurry and help, or we shall all be lost.
I am your honest, true and wedded wife,
Go, dearest husband, help to save my life!'

How fancy throws us into perturbation!
People can die of mere imagination,
So deep is the impression one can take.
This silly carpenter began to quake,
Before his eyes there verily seemed to be
The floods of Noah, wallowing like the sea
And drowning Alison his honey-pet.
He wept and wailed, his features were all set
In grief, he sighed with many a doleful grunt.
He went and got a tub, began to hunt
For kneading-troughs, found two, and had them sent
Home to his house in secret; then he went
And, unbeknowns, he hung them from a rafter.
With his own hands he made three ladders after,
Uprights and rungs, to help them in their scheme
Of climbing where they hung upon the beam.
He victualled tub and trough, and made all snug
With bread and cheese, and ale in a large jug,
Enough for three of them to last the day,
And, just before completing this array,
Packed off the maid and his apprentice too
To London on a job they had to do.
And on the Monday when it drew to night
He shut his door and dowsed the candle-light
And made quite sure all was as it should be.
And shortly, up they clambered, all the three,
Silent and separate. They began to pray
And '*Pater Noster* mum', said Nicholay,
And 'mum' said John, and 'mum' said Alison.
The carpenter's devotions being done,
He sat quite still, then fell to prayer again
With one ear cocked, however, for the rain.
The carpenter, with all the work he'd seen,
Fell dead asleep – round curfew, must have been,
Maybe a little later on the whole.
He groaned in sleep for travail of his soul
And snored because his head was turned awry.
Down by their ladders, stalking from on high

Came Nicholas and Alison, and sped
Softly downstairs, without a word, to bed,
And where this carpenter was wont to be
The revels started and the melody.
And thus lay Nicholas and Alison
Busy in solace and the quest of fun,
Until the bell for lauds had started ringing
And in the chancel friars began their singing.
This parish clerk, this amorous Absalon,
Love-stricken still and very woe-begone,
Upon the Monday was in company
At Osney with his friends for jollity,
And chanced to ask a resident cloisterer
What had become of John the carpenter.
The fellow drew him out of church to say,
'Don't know; not been at work since Saturday.
I can't say where he is; I think he went
To fetch the Abbot timber. He is sent
Often enough for timber, has to go
Out to the Grange and stop a day or so;
If not, he's certainly at home to-day,
But where he is I can't exactly say.'
Absalon was a jolly lad and light
Of heart; he thought, 'I'll stay awake to-night;
I'm certain that I haven't seen him stirring
About his door since dawn; it's safe inferring
That he's away. As I'm alive I'll go
And tap his window softly at the crow
Of cock – the sill is low-set on the wall.
I shall see Alison and tell her all
My love-longing, and I can hardly miss
Some favour from her, at the least a kiss.
I'll get some satisfaction anyway;
There's been an itching in my mouth all day
And that's a sign of kissing at the least.
And all last night I dreamt about a feast.
I think I'll go and sleep an hour or two,
Then wake and have some fun, that's what I'll do.'

The first cock crew at last, and thereupon
Up rose this jolly lover Absalon
In gayest clothes, garnished with that and this;
But first he chewed a grain of liquorice
To charm his breath before he combed his hair.
Under his tongue the comfit nestling there
Would make him gracious. He began to roam
Towards the carpenter's; he reached their home
And by the casement window took his stand.
Breast-high it stood, no higher than his hand.
He gave a cough, it was a semi-sound;
'Alison, honey-comb, are you around?
Sweet cinnamon, my little pretty bird,
Sweetheart, wake up and say a little word!
You seldom think of me in all my woe,
I sweat for love of you wherever I go!
No wonder if I do, I pine and bleat
As any lambkin hungering for the teat,
Believe me, darling, I'm so deep in love
I croon with longing like a turtle-dove,
I eat as little as a girl at school.'
'You go away,' she answered, 'you Tom-fool!
There's no come-up-and-kiss-me here for you.
I love another and why shouldn't I too?
Better than you, by Jesu, Absalon!
Take yourself off or I shall throw a stone.
I want to get some sleep. You go to Hell!'
'Alas!' said Absalon. 'I knew it well;
True love is always mocked and girded at;
So kiss me, if you can't do more than that,
For Jesu's love and for the love of me!'
'And if I do, will you be off?' said she.
'Promise you, darling,' answered Absalon.
'Get ready then; wait, I'll put something on,'
She said and then she added under breath
To Nicholas, 'Hush . . . we shall laugh to death!'
This Absalon went down upon his knees;
'I am a lord!' he thought, 'And by degrees

There may be more to come; the plot may thicken.'
'Mercy, my love!' he said, 'Your mouth, my chicken!'
She flung the window open then in haste
And said, 'Have done, come on, no time to waste,
The neighbours here are always on the spy.'
Absalon started wiping his mouth dry.
Dark was the night as pitch, as black as coal,
And at the window out she put her hole,
And Absalon, so fortune framed the farce,
Put up his mouth and kissed her naked arse
Most savorously before he knew of this.
And back he started. Something was amiss;
He knew quite well a woman has no beard,
Yet something rough and hairy had appeared.
'What have I done?' he said. 'Can that be you?'
'Teehee!' she cried and clapped the window to.
Off went poor Absalon sadly through the dark.
'A beard! a beard!' cried Nicholas the Spark.
'God's body, that was something like a joke!'
And Absalon, overhearing what he spoke,
Bit on his lips and nearly threw a fit
In rage and thought, 'I'll pay you back for it!'
Who's busy rubbing, scraping at his lips
With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,
But Absalon? He thought, 'I'll bring him down!
I wouldn't let this go for all the town.
I'd take my soul and sell it to the Devil
To be revenged upon him! I'll get level.
O God, why did I let myself be fooled?'
The fiery heat of love by now had cooled,
For from the time he kissed her hinder parts
He didn't give a tinker's curse for tarts;
His malady was cured by this endeavour
And he defied all paramours whatever.
So, weeping like a child that has been whipped,
He turned away; across the road he slipped
And called on Gervase. Gervase was a smith;
His forge was full of things for ploughing with

And he was busy sharpening a share.
  Absalon knocked, and with an easy air
Called, 'Gervase! Open up the door, come on!'
'What's that? Who's there?' 'It's me, it's Absalon.'
'What, Absalon? By Jesu's blessed tree
You're early up! Hey, *benedicite*,
What's wrong? Some jolly girl as like as not
Has coaxed you out and set you on the trot.
Blessed St Neot! You know the thing I mean.'
  But Absalon, who didn't give a bean
For all his joking, offered no debate.
He had a good deal more upon his plate
Than Gervase knew and said, 'Would it be fair
To borrow that coulter in the chimney there,
The hot one, see it? I've a job to do;
It won't take long, I'll bring it back to you.'
Gervase replied, 'Why, if you asked for gold,
A bag of sovereigns or of wealth untold,
It should be yours, as I'm an honest smith.
But, Christ, why borrow that to do it with?'
'Let that,' said Absalon, 'be as it may;
You'll hear about it all some other day.'
  He caught the coulter up – the haft was cool –
And left the smithy softly with the tool,
Crept to the little window in the wall
And coughed. He knocked and gave a little call
Under the window as he had before.
  Alison said, 'There's someone at the door.
Who's knocking there? I'll warrant it's a thief.'
'Why, no,' said he, 'my little flower-leaf,
It's your own Absalon, my sweety-thing!
Look what I've brought you – it's a golden ring
My mother gave me, as I may be saved.
It's very fine, and prettily engraved;
I'll give it to you, darling, for a kiss.'
  Now Nicholas had risen for a piss,
And thought he could improve upon the jape
And make him kiss his arse ere he escape,

And opening the window with a jerk,
Stuck out his arse, a handsome piece of work,
Buttocks and all, as far as to the haunch.
  Said Absalon, all set to make a launch,
'Speak, pretty bird, I know not where thou art!'
This Nicholas at once let fly a fart
As loud as if it were a thunder-clap.
He was near blinded by the blast, poor chap,
But his hot iron was ready; with a thump
He smote him in the middle of the rump.
  Off went the skin a hand's breadth round about
Where the hot coulter struck and burnt it out.
Such was the pain, he thought he must be dying
And, mad with agony, he started crying,
'Help! Water! Water! Help! For Heaven's love!'
  The carpenter, startled from sleep above,
And hearing shouts for water and a thud,
Thought, 'Heaven help us! Here comes Nowel's Flood!'
And up he sat and with no more ado
He took his axe and smote the ropes in two
And down went everything. He didn't stop
To sell his bread and ale, but came down flop
Upon the floor and fainted right away.
  Up started Alison and Nicholay
And shouted, 'Help!' and 'Murder!' in the street.
The neighbours all came running up in heat
And stood there staring at the wretched man.
He lay there fainting, pale beneath his tan;
His arm in falling had been broken double.
But still he was obliged to face his trouble,
For when he spoke he was at once borne down
By Nicholas and his wife. They told the town
That he was mad, there'd got into his blood
Some sort of nonsense about 'Nowel's Flood',
That vain imaginings and fantasy
Had made him buy the kneading-tubs, that he
Had hung them in the rafters up above
And that he'd begged them both for heaven's love

To sit up in the roof for company.
  All started laughing at this lunacy
And streamed upstairs to gape and pry and poke,
And treated all his sufferings as a joke.
No matter what the carpenter asserted
It went for nothing, no one was converted;
With powerful oaths they swore the fellow down
And he was held for mad by all the town;
The students all ganged up with one another
Saying: 'The fellow's crazy, my dear brother!'
And every one among them laughed and joked.
And so the carpenter's wife was truly poked,
As if his jealousy to justify,
And Absalon has kissed her nether eye
And Nicholas is branded on the bum
And God bring all of us to Kingdom Come.

THE REEVE'S TALE

The Reeve's Prologue

When all had laughed at the preposterous lark
Of Absalon and Nicholas the Spark,
Various folk made various comment after;
But the majority dissolved in laughter,
Nor did I see a soul it seemed to grieve
Unless it might be Oswald, the old Reeve,
For, as he was a carpenter by trade,
He was a little angry still and made
Grumbling remarks and scolded for a bit.
  'As I'm a man I'd pay you back for it,'
He said, 'with how they bleared a Miller's eye,
If I liked dirt and wished to argufy.

But I am old. Dirt doesn't go with doddering,
Grass-time is done and I'm for winter foddering.
My hoary top-knot writes me down for old;
Same as my hair, my heart is full of mould,
Unless I be like them there medlar-fruit,
Them that gets rottener as they ripen to't,
Till they be rotted down in straw and dung.
That's how we get to be, no longer young.
Till we be rotten we can never ripe.
We hop along, as long as world will pipe;
Our will is always catching on the nail,
Wanting a hoary head and a green tail,
Like leeks have got; the strength to play that game
Is gone, though we love foolishness the same.
What we can't do no more we talk about
And rake the ashes when the fire is out.
  'Yet we have four live coals, as I can show;
Lies, boasting, greed and rage will always glow.
Those are the sparks among the ancient embers
Though we be nigh unwelded in our members.
Desire never fails, and that's the truth,
For even now I have a coltish tooth,
Many as be the years now dead and done
Before my tap of life began to run.
Certain, when I was born, so long ago,
Death drew the tap of life and let it flow;
And ever since the tap has done its task,
And now there's little but an empty cask.
My stream of life's but drops upon the rim.
An old fool's tongue will run away with him
To chime and chatter of monkey-tricks that's past;
There's nothing left but dotage at the last!'
  Our Host, on hearing all this sermoning,
Began to speak as lordly as a king,
And said, 'What does it come to, all this wit?
What! Spend the morning talking Holy Writ?
The devil that makes a preacher of a Reeve
Turns cobblers into doctors, I believe.

Give us your story, if you've one in stock.
Why, look! Here's Deptford and it's nine o'clock!
And Greenwich too, with many a blackguard in it.
High time to tell your story, so begin it.'

'Now, gentlemen,' Oswald the Reeve replied,
'I hope as none will be dissatisfied
Though I should tweak the Miller by the cap,
For lawful 'tis to give him tap for tap.

'This drunken Miller we've had so much drool of,
Told how a carpenter was made a fool of,
Maybe to score off me, for I am one.
By y'r leave, I'll pay him back before I've done
In his own filthy words, you may expec'.
I hope to God he breaks his bloody neck.
He sees the mote in my eye, if there is un,
But cannot see the beam there is in his'n.'

The Reeve's Tale

At Trumpington, not far from Cambridge town,
A bridge goes over where the brook runs down
And by that brook there stands a mill as well.
And it's God's truth that I am going to tell.

There was a miller lived there many a day
As proud as any peacock and as gay;
He could play bag-pipes too, fish, mend his gear,
And turn a lathe, and wrestle, and poach deer.
And at his belt he carried a long blade,
Trenchant it was as any sword that's made,
And in his pouch a jolly little knife.
No one dared touch him, peril of his life.
He had a Sheffield dagger in his hose.
Round was his face and puggish was his nose;
Bald as an ape he was. To speak more fully,
He was a thorough-going market bully
Whom none dared lay a hand on or come near
Without him swearing that they'd buy it dear.

He was a thief as well of corn and meal,
And sly at that; his habit was to steal.
Simpkin the Swagger he was called in scorn.
He had a wife and she was nobly born;
Her father was the parson of the town;
A dowry of brass dishes he put down
In order to have Simpkin his relation.
The nuns had given her an education.
Simpkin would take no woman, so he said,
Unless she were a virgin and well-bred,
To save the honour of his yeoman stock;
And she was proud, pert as a magpie cock.

It was a proper sight to see the pair
On holidays, what with him strutting there
In front of her, his hood about his head,
And she behind him all decked out in red,
Like Simpkin's hose, for scarlet-red he had 'em.
No one dared call her anything but 'Madam',
No one who passed was bold enough to try
A bit of fun with her or wink an eye,
Unless indeed he wanted Sim the Swagger
To murder him with cutlass, knife or dagger,
For jealous folk are dangerous, you know,
At least they want their wives to think them so.
And then her birth was smirched to say the least;
Being the daughter of a celibate priest
She must maintain her dignity, of which
She had as much as water in a ditch.
She was a sneering woman and she thought
That ladies should respect her, so they ought,
What with her well-connected family,
And education in a nunnery.

They had a daughter too between them both,
She was a girl of twenty summers' growth;
But that was all except a child they had
Still in the cradle, but a proper lad.
The wench was plump, well-grown enough to pass,
With a snub nose and eyes as grey as glass;

The Pardoner said nothing, not a word;
He was so angry that he couldn't speak.
'Well,' said our Host, 'if you're for showing pique,
I'll joke no more, not with an angry man.'
The worthy Knight immediately began,
Seeing the fun was getting rather rough,
And said, 'No more, we've all had quite enough.
Now, Master Pardoner, perk up, look cheerly!
And you, Sir Host, whom I esteem so dearly,
I beg of you to kiss the Pardoner.
'Come, Pardoner, draw nearer, my dear sir.
Let's laugh again and keep the ball in play.'
They kissed, and we continued on our way.

[GROUP D]

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

'If there were no authority on earth
Except experience, mine, for what it's worth,
And that's enough for me, all goes to show
That marriage is a misery and a woe;
For let me say, if I may make so bold,
My lords, since when I was but twelve years old,
Thanks be to God Eternal evermore,
Five husbands have I had at the church door;
Yes, it's a fact that I have had so many,
All worthy in their way, as good as any.
'Someone said recently for my persuasion
That as Christ only went on one occasion
To grace a wedding – in Cana of Galilee –
He taught me by example there to see

That it is wrong to marry more than once.
Consider, too, how sharply, for the nonce,
He spoke, rebuking the Samaritan
Beside the well, Christ Jesus, God and man.
"Thou has had five men husband unto thee
And he that even now thou hast," said He,
"Is not thy husband." Such the words that fell;
But what He meant thereby I cannot tell.
Why was her fifth – explain it if you can
No lawful spouse to the Samaritan?
How many might have had her, then, to wife?
I've never heard an answer all my life
To give the number final definition.
People may guess or frame a supposition,
But I can say for certain, it's no lie,
God bade us all to wax and multiply.
That kindly text I well can understand.
Is not my husband under God's command
To leave his father and mother and take me?
No word of what the number was to be,
Then why not marry two or even eight?
And why speak evil of the married state?
'Take wise King Solomon of long ago;
We hear he had a thousand wives or so.
And would to God it were allowed to me
To be refreshed, aye, half so much as he!
He must have had a gift of God for wives,
No one to match him in a world of lives!
This noble king, one may as well admit,
On the first night threw many a merry fit
With each of them, he was so much alive.
Blessed be God that I have wedded five!
Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears.
I can't keep continent for years and years.
No sooner than one husband's dead and gone
Some other Christian man shall take me on,
For then, so says the Apostle, I am free
To wed, o' God's name, where it pleases me.

They fell on him and slew him, two to one.
Then said the first of them when this was done,
'Now for a drink. Sit down and let's be merry,
For later on there'll be the corpse to bury.'
And, as it happened, reaching for a sup,
He took a bottle full of poison up
And drank and his companion, nothing loth,
Drank from it also, and they perished both.
There is, in Avicenna's long relation*
Concerning poison and its operation,
Trust me, no ghastlier section to transcend
What these two wretches suffered at their end.
Thus these two murderers received their due,
So did the treacherous young poisoner too.

O cursed sin! O blackguardly excess!
O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!
O gluttony that lusted on and diced!
O blasphemy that took the name of Christ
With habit-hardened oaths that pride began!
Alas, how comes it that a mortal man,
That thou, to thy Creator, Him that wrought thee,
That paid His precious blood for thee and bought thee,
Art so unnatural and false within?
Dearly beloved, God forgive your sin
And keep you from the vice of avarice!
My holy pardon frees you all of this,
Provided that you make the right approaches,
That is with sterling, rings, or silver brooches.
Bow down your heads under this holy bull!
Come on, you women, offer up your wool!
I'll write your name into my ledger; so!
Into the bliss of Heaven you shall go.
For I'll absolve you by my holy power,
You that make offering, clean as at the hour
When you were born. . . . That, sirs, is how I preach.
And Jesu Christ, soul's healer, aye, the leech
Of every soul, grant pardon and relieve you

Of sin, for that is best, I won't deceive you.
One thing I should have mentioned in my tale,
Dear people. I've some relics in my bale
And pardons too, as full and fine, I hope,
As any in England, given me by the Pope.
If there be one among you that is willing
To have my absolution for a shilling
Devoutly given, come! and do not harden
Your hearts but kneel in humbleness for pardon;
Or else, receive my pardon as we go.
You can renew it every town or so
Always provided that you still renew
Each time, and in good money, what is due.
It is an honour to you to have found
A pardoner with his credentials sound
Who can absolve you as you ply the spur
In any accident that may occur.
For instance – we are all at Fortune's beck –
Your horse may throw you down and break your neck.
What a security it is to all
To have me here among you and at call
With pardon for the lowly and the great
When soul leaves body for the future state!
And I advise our Host here to begin,
The most enveloped of you all in sin.
Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay,
And kiss my holy relics right away.
Only a groat. Come on, unbuckle your purse!'
'No, no,' said he, 'not I, and may the curse
Of Christ descend upon me if I do!
You'll have me kissing your old breeches too
And swear they were the relic of a saint
Although your fundament supplied the paint!
Now by St Helen and the Holy Land
I wish I had your ballocks in my hand
Instead of relics in a reliquarium;
Have them cut off and I will help to carry 'em.
We'll have them shrined for you in a hog's turd.'

Wedding's no sin, so far as I can learn.
Better it is to marry than to burn.
'What do I care if people choose to see
Scandal in Lamech for his bigamy?
I know that Abraham was a holy man
And Jacob too – I speak as best I can –
Yet each of them, we know, had several brides,
Like many another holy man besides.
Show me a time or text where God disparages
Or sets a prohibition upon marriages
Expressly, let me have it! Show it me!
And where did He command virginity?
I know as well as you do, never doubt it,
All the Apostle Paul has said about it;
He said that as for precepts he had none.
One may advise a woman to be one;
Advice is no commandment in my view.
He left it in our judgement what to do.
'Had God commanded maidenhood to all
Marriage would be condemned beyond recall,
And certainly if seed were never sown,
How ever could virginity be grown?
Paul did not dare pronounce, let matters rest,
His Master having given him no behest.
There's a prize offered for virginity;
Catch as catch can! Who's in for it? Let's see!
'It is not everyone who hears the call;
On whom God wills He lets His power fall.
The Apostle was a virgin, well I know;
Nevertheless, though all his writings show
He wished that everyone were such as he,
It's all mere counsel to virginity.
And as for being married, he lets me do it
Out of indulgence, so there's nothing to it
In marrying me, suppose my husband dead;
There's nothing bigamous in such a bed.
Though it were good a man should never touch
A woman (meaning here in bed and such)

And dangerous to assemble fire and tow
– What this allusion means you all must know –
He only says virginity is fresh,
More perfect than the frailty of the flesh
In married life – except when he and she
Prefer to live in married chastity.
'I grant it you. I'll never say a word
Decrying maidenhood although preferred
To frequent marriage; there are those who mean
To live in their virginity, as clean
In body as in soul, and never mate.
I'll make no boast about my own estate.
As in a noble household, we are told,
Not every dish and vessel's made of gold,
Some are of wood, yet earn their master's praise,
God calls His folk to Him in many ways.
To each of them God gave His proper gift,
Some this, some that, and left them to make shift.
Virginity is indeed a great perfection,
And married continence, for God's dilection,
But Christ, who of perfection is the well,
Bade not that everyone should go and sell
All that he had and give it to the poor
To follow in His footsteps, that is sure.
He spoke to those that would live perfectly,
And by your leave, my lords, that's not for me.
I will bestow the flower of life, the honey,
Upon the acts and fruit of matrimony.
'Tell me to what conclusion or in aid
Of what were generative organs made?
And for what profit were those creatures wrought?
Trust me, they cannot have been made for naught.
Gloze as you will and plead the explanation
That they were only made for the purgation
Of urine, little things of no avail
Except to know a female from a male,
And nothing else. Did somebody say no?
Experience knows well it isn't so.

The learned may rebuke me, or be loth
To think it so, but they were made for both,
That is to say both use and pleasure in
Engendering, except in case of sin.
Why else the proverb written down and set
In books: "A man must yield his wife her debt"?
What means of paying her can he invent
Unless he use his silly instrument?
It follows they were fashioned at creation
Both to purge urine and for propagation.
'But I'm not saying everyone is bound
Who has such harness as you heard me expound
To go and use it breeding; that would be
To show too little care for chastity.
Christ was a virgin, fashioned as a man,
And many of his saints since time began
Were ever perfect in their chastity.
I'll have no quarrel with virginity.
Let them be pure wheat loaves of maidenhead
And let us wives be known for barley-bread;
Yet Mark can tell that barley-bread sufficed
To freshen many at the hand of Christ.
In that estate to which God summoned me
I'll persevere; I'm not pernickety.
In wifehood I will use my instrument
As freely as my Maker me it sent.
If I turn difficult, God give me sorrow!
My husband, he shall have it eve and morrow
Whenever he likes to come and pay his debt,
I won't prevent him! I'll have a husband yet
Who shall be both my debtor and my slave
And bear his tribulation to the grave
Upon his flesh, as long as I'm his wife.
For mine shall be the power all his life
Over his proper body, and not he,
Thus the Apostle Paul has told it me,
And bade our husbands they should love us well;
There's a command on which I like to dwell . . .'

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon
'Madam,' he said, 'by God and by St John,
That's noble preaching no one could surpass!
I was about to take a wife; alas!
Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?
There'll be no marrying for me this year!'
'You wait,' she said, 'my story's not begun.
You'll taste another brew before I've done;
You'll find it doesn't taste as good as ale;
And when I've finished telling you my tale
Of tribulation in the married life
In which I've been an expert as a wife,
That is to say, myself have been the whip.
So please yourself whether you want to sip
At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.
Be cautious before making the approach,
For I'll give instances, and more than ten.
And those who won't be warned by other men,
By other men shall suffer their correction,
So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.*
You read his *Almagest*; you'll find it there.'
'Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,'
The Pardoner said, 'go on as you began!
Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.
Instruct us younger men in your technique.'
'Gladly,' she said, 'if you will let me speak,
But still I hope the company won't reprove me
Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,
And please don't be offended at my views;
They're really only offered to amuse.
'Now, gentlemen, I'll on and tell my tale
And as I hope to drink good wine and ale
I'll tell the truth. Those husbands that I had,
Three of them were good and two were bad.
The three that I call "good" were rich and old.
They could indeed with difficulty hold
The articles that bound them all to me;
(No doubt you understand my simile).

So help me God, I have to laugh outright
Remembering how I made them work at night!
And faith I set no store by it; no pleasure
It was to me. They'd given me their treasure,
And so I had no need of diligence
Winning their love, or showing reverence.
They loved me well enough, so, heavens above,
Why should I make a dainty of their love?
'A knowing woman's work is never done
To get a lover if she hasn't one,
But as I had them eating from my hand
And as they'd yielded me their gold and land,
Why then take trouble to provide them pleasure
Unless to profit and amuse my leisure?
I set them so to work, I'm bound to say;
Many a night they sang, "Alack the day!"
Never for them the flitch of bacon though
That some have won in Essex at Dunmow!*
I managed them so well by my technique
Each was delighted to go out and seek
And buy some pretty thing for me to wear,
Happy if I as much as spoke them fair.
God knows how spitefully I used to scold them.
'Listen, I'll tell you how I used to hold them,
You knowing women, who can understand,
First put them in the wrong, and out of hand.
No one can be so bold – I mean no man –
At lies and swearing as a woman can.
This is no news, as you'll have realized,
To knowing ones, but to the misadvised.
A knowing wife if she is worth her salt
Can always prove her husband is at fault,
And even though the fellow may have heard
Some story told him by a little bird
She knows enough to prove the bird is crazy
And get her maid to witness she's a daisy,
With full agreement, scarce solicited.
But listen. Here's the sort of thing I said:

'"Now, sir old dotard, what is that you say?
Why is my neighbour's wife so smart and gay?
She is respected everywhere she goes.
I sit at home and have no decent clothes.
Why haunt her house? What are you doing there?
Are you so amorous? Is she so fair?
What, whispering secrets to our maid? For shame,
Sir ancient lecher! Time you dropped that game.
And if I see my gossip or a friend
You scold me like a devil! There's no end
If I as much as stroll towards his house.
Then you come home as drunken as a mouse,
You mount your throne and preach, chapter and verse
– All nonsense – and you tell me it's a curse
To marry a poor woman – she's expensive;
Or if her family's wealthy and extensive
You say it's torture to endure her pride
And melancholy airs, and more beside.
And if she has a pretty face, old traitor,
You say she's game for any fornicator
And ask what likelihood will keep her straight
With all those men who lie about in wait.
'"You say that some desire us for our wealth,
Some for our shapeliness, our looks, our health,
Some for our singing, others for our dancing,
Some for our gentleness and dalliant glancing,
And some because our hands are soft and small;
By your account the devil gets us all.
'"You say what castle wall can be so strong
As to hold out against a siege for long?
And if her looks are foul you say that she
Is hot for every man that she can see,
Leaping upon them with a spaniel's airs
Until she finds a man to buy her wares.
Never was goose upon the lake so grey
But that she found a gander, so you say.
You say it's hard to keep a girl controlled
If she's the kind that no one wants to hold.

That's what you say as you stump off to bed,
You brute! You say no man of sense would wed,
That is, not if he wants to go to Heaven.
Wild thunderbolts and fire from the Seven
Planets descend and break your withered neck!
'"You say that buildings falling into wreck,
And smoke, and scolding women, are the three
Things that will drive a man from home. Dear me!
What ails the poor old man to grumble so?
'"We women hide our faults but let them show
Once we are safely married, so you say.
There's a fine proverb for a popinjay!
'"You say that oxen, asses, hounds and horses
Can be tried out on various ploys and courses;
And basins too, and dishes when you buy them,
Spoons, chairs and furnishings, a man can try them
As he can try a suit of clothes, no doubt,
But no one ever tries a woman out
Until he's married her; old dotard crow!
And then you say she lets her vices show.
'"You also say we count it for a crime
Unless you praise our beauty all the time,
Unless you're always poring on our faces
And call us pretty names in public places;
Or if you fail to treat me to a feast
Upon my birthday – presents at the least –
Or to respect my nurse and her grey hairs,
Or be polite to all my maids upstairs
And to my father's cronies and his spies.
That's what you say, old barrelful of lies!
'"Then there's our young apprentice, handsome Johnny,
Because he has crisp hair that shines as bonny
As finest gold, and squires me up and down
You show your low suspicions in a frown.
I wouldn't have him, not if you died to-morrow!
'"And tell me this, God punish you with sorrow,
Why do you hide the keys of coffer doors?
It's just as much my property as yours.

Do you want to make an idiot of your wife?
Now, by the Lord that gave me soul and life,
You shan't have both, you can't be such a noddy
As think to keep my goods and have my body!
One you must do without, whatever you say.
And do you need to spy on me all day?
I think you'd like to lock me in your coffer!
'Go where you please, dear wife,' you ought to offer,
'Amuse yourself! I shan't give ear to malice,
I know you for a virtuous wife, Dame Alice.'
We cannot love a husband who takes charge
Of where we go. We like to be at large.
'"Above all other men may God confer
His blessing on that wise astrologer
Sir Ptolemy who, in his *Almagest*,
Has set this proverb down: 'Of men, the best
And wisest care not who may have in hand
The conduct of the world.' I understand
That means, 'If you've enough, you shouldn't care
How prosperously other people fare.'
Be sure, old dotard, if you call the bluff,
You'll get your evening rations right enough.
He's a mean fellow that lets no man handle
His lantern when it's just to light a candle
He has lost no light, he hasn't felt the strain;
And you have light enough, so why complain?
'"And when a woman tries a mild display
In dress or costly ornament, you say
It is a danger to her chastity,
And then, bad luck to you, start making free
With Bible tags in the Apostle's name;
'And in like manner, chastely and with shame,
You women should adorn yourselves,' said he,
'And not with braided hair or jewelry,
With pearl or golden ornament.' What next!
I'll pay as much attention to your text
And rubric in such things as would a gnat.
'"And once you said that I was like a cat,

For if you singe a cat it will not roam
And that's the way to keep a cat at home.
But when she feels her fur is sleek and gay
She can't be kept indoors for half a day
But off she takes herself as dusk is falling
To show her fur and go a-caterwauling.
Which means if I feel gay, as you suppose,
I shall run out to show my poor old clothes.
'"Silly old fool! You and your private spies!
Go on, beg Argus with his hundred eyes
To be my bodyguard, that's better still!
But yet he shan't, I say, against my will.
I'll pull him by the beard, believe you me!
'"And once you said that principally three*
Misfortunes trouble earth, east, west and north,
And no man living could endure a fourth.
My dear sir shrew, Jesu cut short your life!
You preach away and say a hateful wife
Is reckoned to be one of these misfortunes.
Is there no other trouble that importunes
The world and that your parables could condemn?
Must an unhappy wife be one of them?
'"Then you compared a woman's love to Hell,
To barren land where water will not dwell,
And you compared it to a quenchless fire,
The more it burns the more is its desire
To burn up everything that burnt can be.
You say that just as worms destroy a tree
A wife destroys her husband and contrives,
As husbands know, the ruin of their lives."
'Such was the way, my lords, you understand
I kept my older husbands well in hand.
I told them they were drunk and their unfitness
To judge my conduct forced me to take witness
That they were lying. Johnny and my niece
Would back me up. O Lord, I wrecked their peace,
Innocent as they were, without remorse!
For I could bite and whinney like a horse

And launch complaints when things were all my fault;
I'd have been lost if I had called a halt.
First to the mill is first to grind your corn;
I attacked first and they were overborne,
Glad to apologize and even suing
Pardon for what they'd never thought of doing.
'I'd tackle one for wenching, out of hand,
Although so ill the man could hardly stand,
Yet he felt flattered in his heart because
He thought it showed how fond of him I was.
I swore that all my walking out at night
Was just to keep his wenching well in sight.
That was a dodge that made me shake with mirth;
But all such wit is given us at birth.
Lies, tears and spinning are the things God gives
By nature to a woman, while she lives.
So there's one thing at least that I can boast,
That in the end I always ruled the roast;
Cunning or force was sure to make them stumble,
And always keeping up a steady grumble.
'But bed-time above all was their misfortune;
That was the place to scold them and importune
And baulk their fun. I never would abide
In bed with them if hands began to slide
Till they had promised ransom, paid a fee:
And then I let them do their nicety.
And so I tell this tale to every man,
"It's all for sale and let him win who can."
No empty-handed man can lure a bird.
His pleasures were my profit; I concurred,
Even assumed fictitious appetite,
Though bacon never gave me much delight.
And that's the very fact that made me chide them.
And had the Pope been sitting there beside them
I wouldn't have spared them at their very table,
But paid them out as far as I was able.
I say, so help me God Omnipotent,
Were I to make my will and testament

I owe them nothing, paid them word for word
Putting my wits to use, and they preferred
To give it up and take it for the best
For otherwise they would have got no rest.
Though they might glower like a maddened beast
They got no satisfaction, not the least.
'I then would say, "My dear, just take a peep!
What a meek look on Willikin our sheep!
Come nearer, husband, let me kiss your cheek;
You should be just as patient, just as meek;
Sweeten your heart. Your conscience needs a probe.
You're fond of preaching patience out of Job,
And so be patient; practise what you preach,
And if you don't, my dear, we'll have to teach
You that it's nice to have a quiet life.
One of us must be master, man or wife,
And since a man's more reasonable, he
Should be the patient one, you must agree.
'"What ails you, man, to grumble so and groan?
Just that you want my what-not all your own?
Why, take it all, man, take it, every bit!
St Peter, what a love you have for it!
For if I were to sell my *belle chose*,
I could go walking fresher than a rose;
But I will keep it for your private tooth.
By God, you are to blame, and that's the truth."
'That's how my first three husbands were undone.
Now let me tell you of my last but one.
'He was a reveller, was number four;
That is to say he kept a paramour.
Young, strong and stubborn, I was full of rage
And jolly as a magpie in a cage.
Play me the harp and I would dance and sing,
Believe me, like a nightingale in spring,
If I had had a draught of sweetened wine.
'Metellius, that filthy lout – the swine
Who snatched a staff and took his woman's life
For drinking wine – if I had been his wife

He never would have daunted me from drink.
Whenever I take wine I have to think
Of Venus, for as cold engenders hail
A lecherous mouth begets a lecherous tail.
A woman in her cups has no defence,
As lechers know from long experience.
'But Christ! Whenever it comes back to me,
When I recall my youth and jollity,
It fairly warms the cockles of my heart!
This very day I feel a pleasure start,
Yes, I can feel it tickling at the root.
Lord, how it does me good! I've had my fruit,
I've had my world and time, I've had my fling!
But age that comes to poison everything
Has taken all my beauty and my pith.
Well, let it go, the devil go therewith!
The flour is gone, there is no more to say,
And I must sell the bran as best I may;
But still I mean to find my way to fun. . . .
Now let me tell you of my last but one.
'I told you how it filled my heart with spite
To see another woman his delight,
By God and all His saints I made it good!
I carved him out a cross of the same wood,
Not with my body in a filthy way,
But certainly by seeming rather gay
To others, frying him in his own grease
Of jealousy and rage; he got no peace.
By God on earth I was his purgatory,
For which I hope his soul may be in glory.
God knows he sang a sorry tune, he flinched,
And bitterly enough, when the shoe pinched.
And God and he alone can say how grim,
How many were the ways I tortured him.
'He died when I came back from Jordan Stream
And he lies buried under the rood-beam,
Albeit that his tomb can scarce supply us
With such a show as that of King Darius

– Apelles sculped it in a sumptuous taste –
Expensive funerals are just a waste.
Farewell to him, God give his spirit rest!
He's in his grave, he's nailed up in his chest.
'Now of my fifth, last husband let me tell.
God never let his soul be sent to Hell!
And yet he was my worst, and many a blow
He struck me still can ache along my row
Of ribs, and will until my dying day.
'But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
So coaxing, so persuasive. . . . Heaven knows
Whenever he wanted it – my *belle chose* –
Though he had beaten me in every bone
He still could wheedle me to love, I own.
I think I loved him best, I'll tell no lie.
He was disdainful in his love, that's why.
We women have a curious fantasy
In such affairs, or so it seems to me.
When something's difficult, or can't be had,
We crave and cry for it all day like mad.
Forbid a thing, we pine for it all night,
Press fast upon us and we take to flight;
We use disdain in offering our wares.
A throng of buyers sends prices up at fairs,
Cheap goods have little value, they suppose;
And that's a thing that every woman knows.
'My fifth and last – God keep his soul in health!
The one I took for love and not for wealth,
Had been at Oxford not so long before
But had left school and gone to lodge next door,
Yes, it was to my godmother's he'd gone.
God bless her soul! *Her* name was Alison.
She knew my heart and more of what I thought
Than did the parish priest, and so she ought!
She was my confidante, I told her all.
For had my husband pissed against a wall
Or done some crime that would have cost his life,
To her and to another worthy wife

And to my niece, because I loved her well,
I'd have told everything there was to tell.
And so I often did, and Heaven knows
It used to set him blushing like a rose
For shame, and he would blame his lack of sense
In telling me secrets of such consequence.
'And so one time it happened that in Lent,
As I so often did, I rose and went
To see her, ever wanting to be gay
And go a-strolling, March, April and May,
From house to house for chat and village malice.
'Johnny (the boy from Oxford) and Dame Alice
And I myself, into the fields we went.
My husband was in London all that Lent;
All the more fun for me – I only mean
The fun of seeing people and being seen
By cocky lads; for how was I to know
Where or what graces Fortune might bestow?
And so I made a round of visitations,
Went to processions, festivals, orations,
Preachments and pilgrimages, watched the carriages
They use for plays and pageants, went to marriages,
And always wore my gayest scarlet dress.
'These worms, these moths, these mites, I must confess,
Got little chance to eat it, by the way.
Why not? Because I wore it every day.
'Now let me tell you all that came to pass.
We sauntered in the meadows through the grass
Toying and dallying to such extent,
Johnny and I, that I grew provident
And I suggested, were I ever free
And made a widow, he should marry me.
And certainly – I do not mean to boast –
I ever was more provident than most
In marriage matters and in other such.
I never think a mouse is up to much
That only has one hole in all the house;
If that should fail, well, it's good-bye the mouse.

'I let him think I was as one enchanted
(That was a trick my godmother implanted)
And told him I had dreamt the night away
Thinking of him, and dreamt that as I lay
He tried to kill me. Blood had drenched the bed.
'"But still it was a lucky dream," I said,
"For blood betokens gold as I recall."
It was a lie. I hadn't dreamt at all.
'Twas from my godmother I learnt my lore
In matters such as that, and many more.
'Well, let me see . . . what had I to explain?
Aha! By God, I've got the thread again.
'When my fourth husband lay upon his bier
I wept all day and looked as drear as drear,
As widows must, for it is quite in place,
And with a handkerchief I hid my face.
Now that I felt provided with a mate
I wept but little, I need hardly state.
'To church they bore my husband on the morrow
With all the neighbours round him venting sorrow,
And one of them of course was handsome Johnny.
So help me God, I thought he looked so bonny
Behind the coffin! Heavens, what a pair
Of legs he had! Such feet, so clean and fair!
I gave my whole heart up, for him to hold.
He was, I think, some twenty winters old,
And I was forty then, to tell the truth.
But still, I always had a coltish tooth.
Yes, I'm gap-toothed; it suits me well I feel,
It is the print of Venus and her seal.
So help me God I was a lusty one,
Fair, young and well-to-do, and full of fun!
And truly, as my husbands said to me
I had the finest *quoniam* that might be.
For Venus sent me feeling from the stars
And my heart's boldness came to me from Mars.
Venus gave me desire and lecherousness
And Mars my hardihood, or so I guess,

Born under Taurus and with Mars therein.
Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
I ever followed natural inclination
Under the power of my constellation
And was unable to deny, in truth,
My chamber of Venus to a likely youth.
The mark of Mars is still upon my face
And also in another privy place.
For as I may be saved by God above,
I never used discretion when in love
But ever followed on my appetite,
Whether the lad was short, long, black or white.
Little I cared, if he was fond of me,
How poor he was, or what his rank might be.
'What shall I say? Before the month was gone
This gay young student, my delightful John,
Had married me in solemn festival.
I handed him the money, lands and all
That ever had been given me before;
This I repented later, more and more.
None of my pleasures would he let me seek.
By God, he smote me once upon the cheek
Because I tore a page out of his book,
And that's the reason why I'm deaf. But look,
Stubborn I was, just like a lioness;
As to my tongue, a very wrangleress.
I went off gadding as I had before
From house to house, however much he swore.
Because of that he used to preach and scold,
Drag Roman history up from days of old,
How one Simplicius Gallus left his wife,
Deserting her completely all his life,
Only for poking out her head one day
Without a hat, upon the public way.
'Some other Roman – I forget his name –
Because his wife went to a summer's game
Without his knowledge, left her in the lurch.
'And he would take the Bible up and search

For proverbs in Ecclesiasticus,
Particularly one that has it thus:
"Suffer no wicked woman to gad about."
And then would come the saying (need you doubt?)
A man who seeks to build his house of sallows,
A man who spurs a blind horse over fallows,
Or lets his wife make pilgrimage to Hallows,
Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.
But all for naught. I didn't give a hen
For all his proverbs and his wise old men.
Nor would I take rebuke at any price;
I hate a man who points me out my vice,
And so, God knows, do many more than I.
That drove him raging mad, you may rely.
Nor more would I forbear him, I can promise.
'Now let me tell you truly by St Thomas
About that book and why I tore the page
And how he smote me deaf in very rage.
'He had a book, he kept it on his shelf,
And night and day he read it to himself
And laughed aloud, although it was quite serious.
He called it *Theophrastus and Valerius.**
There was another Roman, much the same,
A cardinal; St Jerome was his name.
He wrote a book against Jovinian,
Bound up together with Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula and Heloise,
An abbess, lived near Paris. And with these
Were bound the parables of Solomon,
With Ovid's *Art of Love* another one.
All these were bound together in one book
And day and night he used to take a look
At what it said, when he had time and leisure
Or had no occupation but his pleasure,
Which was to read this book of wicked wives;
He knew more legends of them and their lives
Than there are good ones mentioned in the Bible.
For take my word for it, there is no libel

On women that the clergy will not paint,
Except when writing of a woman-saint,
But never good of other women, though.
Who called the lion savage? Do you know?
By God, if women had but written stories
Like those the clergy keep in oratories,
More had been written of man's wickedness
Than all the sons of Adam could redress.
Children of Mercury* and we of Venus
Keep up the contrariety between us;
Mercury stands for wisdom, thrift and science,
Venus for revel, squandering and defiance.
Their several natures govern their direction;
One rises when the other's in dejection.
So Mercury is desolate when halted
In Pisces, just where Venus is exalted,
And Venus falls where Mercury is raised,
And women therefore never can be praised
By learned men, old scribes who cannot do
The works of Venus more than my old shoe.
These in their dotage sit them down to frowse
And say that women break their marriage-vows!
'Now to my purpose as I told you; look,
Here's how I got a beating for a book.
One evening Johnny, glowering with ire,
Sat with his book and read it by the fire.
And first he read of Eve whose wickedness
Brought all mankind to sorrow and distress,
Root-cause why Jesus Christ Himself was slain
And gave His blood to buy us back again.
Aye, there's the text where you expressly find
That woman brought the loss of all mankind.
'He read me then how Samson as he slept
Was shorn of all his hair by her he kept,
And by that treachery Samson lost his eyes.
And then he read me, if I tell no lies,
All about Hercules and Deianire;
She tricked him into setting himself on fire.

'He left out nothing of the miseries
Occasioned by his wives to Socrates.
Xantippe poured a piss-pot on his head.
The silly man sat still, as he were dead,
Wiping his head, but dared no more complain
Than say, "Ere thunder stops, down comes the rain."
'Next of Pasiphaë the Queen of Crete ;*
For wickedness he thought that story sweet;
Fie, say no more! It has a grisly sting,
Her horrible lust. How could she do the thing!
'And then he told of Clytemnestra's lechery
And how she made her husband die by treachery.
He read that story with a great devotion.
'He read me what occasioned the commotion
By which Amphiaraüs lost his life;
My husband had a legend about his wife
Eriphyle, who for a gaud in gold
Went to the Greeks in secret, and she told
Them where to find him, in what hiding-place.
At Thebes it was he met with sorry grace.
'Of Livia and Lucilia then he read,
And both of course had killed their husbands dead,
The one for love, the other out of hate.
Livia prepared some poison for him late
One evening and she killed him out of spite,
Lucilia out of lecherous delight.
For she, in order he might only think
Of her, prepared an aphrodisiac drink;
He drank it and was dead before the morning.
Such is the fate of husbands; it's a warning.
'And then he told how one Latumius
Lamented to his comrade Arrius
That in his orchard-plot there grew a tree
On which his wives had hanged themselves, all three,
Or so he said, out of some spite or other;
To which this Arrius replied, "Dear brother,
Give me a cutting from that blessed tree
And planted in my garden it shall be!"

'Of wives of later date he also read,
How some had killed their husbands when in bed,
Then night-long with their lechers played the whore,
While the poor corpse lay fresh upon the floor.
'One drove a nail into her husband's brain
While he was sleeping, and the man was slain;
Others put poison in their husbands' drink.
He spoke more harm of us than heart can think
And knew more proverbs too, for what they're worth,
Than there are blades of grass upon the earth.
'"Better," says he, "to share your habitation
With lion, dragon, or abomination
Than with a woman given to reproof.
Better," says he, "take refuge on the roof
Than with an angry wife, down in the house;
They are so wicked and cantankerous
They hate the things their husbands like," he'd say.
"A woman always casts her shame away
When she casts off her smock, and that's in haste.
A pretty woman, if she isn't chaste,
Is like a golden ring in a sow's snout."
'Who could imagine, who could figure out
The torture in my heart? It reached the top
And when I saw that he would never stop
Reading this cursed book, all night no doubt,
I suddenly grabbed and tore three pages out
Where he was reading, at the very place,
And fisted such a buffet in his face
That backwards down into our fire he fell.
'Then like a maddened lion, with a yell
He started up and smote me on the head,
And down I fell upon the floor for dead.
'And when he saw how motionless I lay
He was aghast and would have fled away,
But in the end I started to come to.
"O have you murdered me, you robber, you,
To get my land?" I said. "Was that the game?
Before I'm dead I'll kiss you all the same."

'He came up close and kneeling gently down
He said, "My love, my dearest Alison,
So help me God, I never again will hit
You, love; and if I did, you asked for it.
Forgive me!" But for all he was so meek,
I up at once and smote him on the cheek
And said, "Take that to level up the score!
Now let me die, I can't speak any more."
'We had a mort of trouble and heavy weather
But in the end we made it up together.
He gave the bridle over to my hand,
Gave me the government of house and land,
Of tongue and fist, indeed of all he'd got.
I made him burn that book upon the spot.
And when I'd mastered him, and out of deadlock
Secured myself the sovereignty in wedlock,
And when he said, "My own and truest wife,
Do as you please for all the rest of life,
But guard your honour and my good estate,"
From that day forward there was no debate.
So help me God I was as kind to him
As any wife from Denmark to the rim
Of India, and as true. And he to me.
And I pray God that sits in majesty
To bless his soul and fill it with his glory.
Now, if you'll listen, I will tell my story.'

Words between the Summoner and the Friar

The Friar laughed when he had heard all this.
'Well, Ma'am,' he said, 'as God may send me bliss,
This is a long preamble to a tale!'
But when the Summoner heard the Friar rail,
'Just look!' he cried, 'by the two arms of God!
These meddling friars are always on the prod!
Don't we all know a friar and a fly
Go prod and buzz in every dish and pie!

What do you mean with your "preambulation"?
Amble yourself, trot, do a meditation!
You're spoiling all our fun with your commotion.'
The Friar smiled and said, 'Is that your motion?
I promise on my word before I go
To find occasion for a tale or so
About a summoner that will make us laugh.'
'Well, damn your eyes, and on my own behalf,'
The Summoner answered, 'mine be damned as well
If I can't think of several tales to tell
About the friars that will make you mourn
Before we get as far as Sittingbourne.
Have you no patience? Look, he's in a huff!'
Our Host called out, 'Be quiet, that's enough!
Shut up, and let the woman tell her tale.
You must be drunk, you've taken too much ale.
Now, Ma'am, you go ahead and no demur.'
'All right,' she said, 'it's just as you prefer,
If I have licence from this worthy friar.'
'Nothing,' said he, 'that I should more desire.'

The Wife of Bath's Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.
The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke
Their elfin dance on many a green mead,
Or so was the opinion once, I read,
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.
But no one now sees fairies any more.
For now the saintly charity and prayer
Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;
They search the countryside through field and stream
As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,

Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,
And that's the reason why there are no fairies.
Wherever there was wont to walk an elf
To-day there walks the holy friar himself
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,
Saying his mattins and his holy things,
Walking his limit round from town to town.
Women can now go safely up and down
By every bush or under every tree;
There is no other incubus but he,
So there is really no one else to hurt you
And he will do no more than take your virtue.
Now it so happened, I began to say,
Long, long ago in good King Arthur's day,
There was a knight who was a lusty liver.
One day as he came riding from the river
He saw a maiden walking all forlorn
Ahead of him, alone as she was born.
And of that maiden, spite of all she said,
By very force he took her maidenhead.
This act of violence made such a stir,
So much petitioning to the king for her,
That he condemned the knight to lose his head
By course of law. He was as good as dead
(It seems that then the statutes took that view)
But that the queen, and other ladies too,
Implored the king to exercise his grace
So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case
And granted her his life, and she could choose
Whether to show him mercy or refuse.
The queen returned him thanks with all her might,
And then she sent a summons to the knight
At her convenience, and expressed her will:
'You stand, for such is the position still,
In no way certain of your life,' said she,
'Yet you shall live if you can answer me:
What is the thing that women most desire?
Beware the axe and say as I require.

'If you can't answer on the moment, though,
I will concede you this: you are to go
A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn
Sufficient answer, then you shall return.
I shall take gages from you to extort
Surrender of your body to the court.'
Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,
But there! All other choices were denied,
And in the end he chose to go away
And to return after a year and day
Armed with such answer as there might be sent
To him by God. He took his leave and went.
He knocked at every house, searched every place,
Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.
What could it be that women wanted most?
But all the same he never touched a coast,
Country or town in which there seemed to be
Any two people willing to agree.
Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,
'Honour,' said some, some 'Jollity and pleasure,'
Some 'Gorgeous clothes' and others 'Fun in bed,'
'To be oft widowed and remarried,' said
Others again, and some that what most mattered
Was that we should be cosseted and flattered.
That's very near the truth, it seems to me;
A man can win us best with flattery.
To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,
Ensnares us all, the best and worst of us.
Some say the things we most desire are these:
Freedom to do exactly as we please,
With no one to reprove our faults and lies,
Rather to have one call us good and wise.
Truly there's not a woman in ten score
Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,
But she will kick if what he says is true;
You try it out and you will find so too.
However vicious we may be within
We like to be thought wise and void of sin.

Others assert we women find it sweet
When we are thought dependable, discreet
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,
Never betraying things that we are told.
But that's not worth the handle of a rake;
Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!
Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?

Among some other little things, now stale,
Ovid relates that under his long hair
The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair
Of ass's ears; as subtly as he might,
He kept his foul deformity from sight;
Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.
He loved her best, and trusted in her too.
He begged her not to tell a living creature
That he possessed so horrible a feature.
And she – she swore, were all the world to win,
She would not do such villainy and sin
As saddle her husband with so foul a name;
Besides to speak would be to share the shame.
Nevertheless she thought she would have died
Keeping this secret bottled up inside;
It seemed to swell her heart and she, no doubt,
Thought it was on the point of bursting out.

Fearing to speak of it to woman or man,
Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran
And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire
And, as a bittern bumbles in the mire,
She whispered to the water, near the ground,
'Betray me not, O water, with thy sound!
To thee alone I tell it: it appears
My husband has a pair of ass's ears!
Ah! My heart's well again, the secret's out!
I could no longer keep it, not a doubt.'
And so you see, although we may hold fast
A little while, it must come out at last,
We can't keep secrets; as for Midas, well,
Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.

This knight that I am telling you about
Perceived at last he never would find out
What it could be that women loved the best.
Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast,
As home he went, he dared no longer stay;
His year was up and now it was the day.

As he rode home in a dejected mood
Suddenly, at the margin of a wood,
He saw a dance upon the leafy floor
Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.
Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn
Some words of wisdom ere he should return;
But lo! Before he came to where they were,
Dancers and dance all vanished into air!
There wasn't a living creature to be seen
Save one old woman crouched upon the green.
A fouler-looking creature I suppose
Could scarcely be imagined. She arose
And said, 'Sir knight, there's no way on from here.
Tell me what you are looking for, my dear,
For peradventure that were best for you;
We old, old women know a thing or two.'

'Dear Mother,' said the knight, 'alack the day!
I am as good as dead if I can't say
What thing it is that women most desire;
If you could tell me I would pay your hire.'
'Give me your hand,' she said, 'and swear to do
Whatever I shall next require of you
– If so to do should lie within your might –
And you shall know the answer before night.'
'Upon my honour,' he answered, 'I agree.'
'Then,' said the crone, 'I dare to guarantee
Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim.
Upon my life the queen will say the same.
Show me the very proudest of them all
In costly coverchief or jewelled caul
That dare say no to what I have to teach.
Let us go forward without further speech.'

And then she crooned her gospel in his ear
And told him to be glad and not to fear.
They came to court. This knight, in full array,
Stood forth and said, 'O Queen, I've kept my day
And kept my word and have my answer ready.'
There sat the noble matrons and the heady
Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace
Of wisdom, all assembled in that place,
And there the queen herself was throned to hear
And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near
And silence was commanded through the hall.
The queen gave order he should tell them all
What thing it was that women wanted most.
He stood not silent like a beast or post,
But gave his answer with the ringing word
Of a man's voice and the assembly heard:
'My liege and lady, in general,' said he,
'A woman wants the self-same sovereignty*
Over her husband as over her lover,
And master him; he must not be above her.
That is your greatest wish, whether you kill
Or spare me; please yourself. I wait your will.'
In all the court not one that shook her head
Or contradicted what the knight had said;
Maid, wife and widow cried, 'He's saved his life!'
And on the word up started the old wife,
The one the knight saw sitting on the green,
And cried, 'Your mercy, sovereign lady queen!
Before the court disperses, do me right!
'Twas I who taught this answer to the knight,
For which he swore, and pledged his honour to it,
That the first thing I asked of him he'd do it,
So far as it should lie within his might.
Before this court I ask you then, sir knight,
To keep your word and take me for your wife;
For well you know that I have saved your life.
If this be false, deny it on your sword!'
'Alas!' he said, 'Old lady, by the Lord

I know indeed that such was my behest,
But for God's love think of a new request,
Take all my goods, but leave my body free.'
'A curse on us,' she said, 'if I agree!
I may be foul, I may be poor and old,
Yet will not choose to be, for all the gold
That's bedded in the earth or lies above,
Less than your wife, nay, than your very love!'
'My love?' said he. 'By heaven, my damnation!
Alas that any of my race and station
Should ever make so foul a misalliance!'
Yet in the end his pleading and defiance
All went for nothing, he was forced to wed.
He takes his ancient wife and goes to bed.
Now peradventure some may well suspect
A lack of care in me since I neglect
To tell of the rejoicing and display
Made at the feast upon their wedding-day.
I have but a short answer to let fall;
I say there was no joy or feast at all,
Nothing but heaviness of heart and sorrow.
He married her in private on the morrow
And all day long stayed hidden like an owl,
It was such torture that his wife looked foul.
Great was the anguish churning in his head
When he and she were piloted to bed;
He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.
His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;
At last she said, 'Bless us! Is this, my dear,
How knights and wives get on together here?
Are these the laws of good King Arthur's house?
Are knights of his all so contemptuous?
I am your own beloved and your wife,
And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;
And certainly I never did you wrong.
Then why, this first of nights, so sad a song?
You're carrying on as if you were half-witted.
Say, for God's love, what sin have I committed?

I'll put things right if you will tell me how.'
'Put right?' he cried. 'That never can be now!
Nothing can ever be put right again!
You're old, and so abominably plain,
So poor to start with, so low-bred to follow;
It's little wonder if I twist and wallow!
God, that my heart would burst within my breast!'
'Is that,' said she, 'the cause of your unrest?'
'Yes, certainly,' he said, 'and can you wonder?'
'I could set right what you suppose a blunder,
That's if I cared to, in a day or two,
If I were shown more courtesy by you.
Just now,' she said, 'you spoke of gentle birth,
Such as descends from ancient wealth and worth.
If that's the claim you make for gentlemen
Such arrogance is hardly worth a hen.
Whoever loves to work for virtuous ends,
Public and private, and who most intends
To do what deeds of gentleness he can,
Take him to be the greatest gentleman.
Christ wills we take our gentleness from Him,
Not from a wealth of ancestry long dim,
Though they bequeath their whole establishment
By which we claim to be of high descent.
Our fathers cannot make us a bequest
Of all those virtues that became them best
And earned for them the name of gentlemen,
But bade us follow them as best we can.
'Thus the wise poet of the Florentines,
Dante by name, has written in these lines,
For such is the opinion Dante launches:
"Seldom arises by these slender branches
Prowess of men, for it is God, no less,
Wills us to claim of Him our gentleness."
For of our parents nothing can we claim
Save temporal things, and these may hurt and maim.
'But everyone knows this as well as I;
For if gentility were implanted by

The natural course of lineage down the line,
Public or private, could it cease to shine
In doing the fair work of gentle deed?
No vice or villainy could then bear seed.
'Take fire and carry it to the darkest house
Between this kingdom and the Caucasus,
And shut the doors on it and leave it there,
It will burn on, and it will burn as fair
As if ten thousand men were there to see,
For fire will keep its nature and degree,
I can assure you, sir, until it dies.
'But gentleness, as you will recognize,
Is not annexed in nature to possessions.
Men fail in living up to their professions;
But fire never ceases to be fire.
God knows you'll often find, if you enquire,
Some lording full of villainy and shame.
If you would be esteemed for the mere name
Of having been by birth a gentleman
And stemming from some virtuous, noble clan,
And do not live yourself by gentle deed
Or take your father's noble code and creed,
You are no gentleman, though duke or earl.
Vice and bad manners are what make a churl.
'Gentility is only the renown
For bounty that your fathers handed down,
Quite foreign to your person, not your own;
Gentility must come from God alone.
That we are gentle comes to us by grace
And by no means is it bequeathed with place.
'Reflect how noble (says Valerius)
Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,
Who rose from poverty to nobleness.
And read Boethius, Seneca no less,
Thus they express themselves and are agreed:
"Gentle is he that does a gentle deed."
And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude
That even if my ancestors were rude,

Yet God on high – and so I hope He will –
Can grant me grace to live in virtue still,
A gentlewoman only when beginning
To live in virtue and to shrink from sinning.
'As for my poverty which you reprove,
Almighty God Himself in whom we move,
Believe and have our being, chose a life
Of poverty, and every man or wife
Nay, every child can see our Heavenly King
Would never stoop to choose a shameful thing.
No shame in poverty if the heart is gay,
As Seneca and all the learned say.
He who accepts his poverty unhurt
I'd say is rich although he lacked a shirt.
But truly poor are they who whine and fret
And covet what they cannot hope to get.
And he that, having nothing, covets not,
Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.
'True poverty can find a song to sing.
Juvenal says a pleasant little thing:
"The poor can dance and sing in the relief
Of having nothing that will tempt a thief."
Though it be hateful, poverty is good,
A great incentive to a livelihood,
And a great help to our capacity
For wisdom, if accepted patiently.
Poverty is, though wanting in estate,
A kind of wealth that none calumniate.
Poverty often, when the heart is lowly,
Brings one to God and teaches what is holy,
Gives knowledge of oneself and even lends
A glass by which to see one's truest friends.
And since it's no offence, let me be plain;
Do not rebuke my poverty again.
'Lastly you taxed me, sir, with being old.
Yet even if you never had been told
By ancient books, you gentlemen engage,
Yourselves in honour to respect old age.

To call an old man "father" shows good breeding,
And this could be supported from my reading.
'You say I'm old and fouler than a fen.
You need not fear to be a cuckold, then.
Filth and old age, I'm sure you will agree,
Are powerful wardens over chastity.
Nevertheless, well knowing your delights,
I shall fulfil your worldly appetites.
'You have two choices; which one will you try?
To have me old and ugly till I die,
But still a loyal, true, and humble wife
That never will displease you all her life,
Or would you rather I were young and pretty
And chance your arm what happens in a city
Where friends will visit you because of me,
Yes, and in other places too, maybe.
Which would you have? The choice is all your own.'
The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan
At last he said, with all the care in life,
'My lady and my love, my dearest wife,
I leave the matter to your wise decision.
You make the choice yourself, for the provision
Of what may be agreeable and rich
In honour to us both, I don't care which;
Whatever pleases you suffices me.'
'And have I won the mastery?' said she,
'Since I'm to choose and rule as I think fit?'
'Certainly, wife,' he answered her, 'that's it.'
'Kiss me,' she cried. 'No quarrels! On my oath
And word of honour, you shall find me both,
That is, both fair and faithful as a wife;
May I go howling mad and take my life
Unless I prove to be as good and true
As ever wife was since the world was new!
And if to-morrow when the sun's above
I seem less fair than any lady-love.
Than any queen or empress east or west,
Do with my life and death as you think best.

Cast up the curtain, husband. Look at me!'
And when indeed the knight had looked to see,
Lo, she was young and lovely, rich in charms.
In ecstasy he caught her in his arms,
His heart went bathing in a bath of blisses
And melted in a hundred thousand kisses,
And she responded in the fullest measure
With all that could delight or give him pleasure.
So they lived ever after to the end
In perfect bliss; and may Christ Jesus send
Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed,
And grace to overbid them when we wed.
And – Jesu hear my prayer! – cut short the lives
Of those who won't be governed by their wives;
And all old, angry niggards of their pence,
God send them soon a very pestilence!

THE FRIAR'S TALE

The Friar's Prologue

Our worthy limiter, the noble Friar,
Kept glancing with a lowering sort of ire
Towards the Summoner, but, to keep polite,
As yet had said no ugly word outright.
At last he turned towards the Wife of Bath,
'Madam,' he said, 'God be about your path!
You here have touched on many difficult rules
Debated, I assure you, in the Schools.
Much you advanced was excellent, I say!
But, Madam, as we ride along the way
We're only called upon to speak in game.
Let's leave the authorities, in Heaven's name,

To preachers and to schools for ordinands.
'But if it meets the company's demands,
I'll talk about a summoner, for a game,
Lord knows, one can be certain from the name
A summoner isn't much to be commended.
I hope that none of you will be offended.
'A Summoner's one who runs about the nation
Dealing out summonses for fornication,
Is beaten up by every villager
At the town's end . . .' 'Now, mind the manners, sir,'
Our Host called out, 'befitting your estate.
In company we do not want debate.
You tell your tale and let the Summoner be.'
'Nay,' said the Summoner, 'makes no odds to me.
Say what he likes, and when my turn's to come
I'll pay him back, by God! I'll strike him dumb!
I'll tell him what an honour it is, none higher,
To be a limiter, a flattering friar!
I'll tell him all about that job of his.'
Our Host replied, 'Let's have no more of this.'
Then turning to the Friar, 'We prefer,'
He said, 'to hear your story, my dear sir.'

The Friar's Tale

In my own district once there used to be
A fine archdeacon, one of high degree,
Who boldly did the execution due
On fornication and on witchcraft too,
Bawdry, adultery and defamation,
Breaches of wills and contract, spoliation
Of church endowment, failure in the rents
And tithes and disregard of sacraments,
All these and many other kinds of crime
That need have no rehearsal at this time,
Usury, simony too. But he could boast
That lechery was what he punished most.

CHAUCER'S RETRACTIONS

The Maker of this Book here takes his Leave

Now I beg all those that listen to this little treatise, or read it if there be anything in it that pleases them, they thank Our Lord Jesu Christ for it, from whom proceeds all understanding and goodness.

And if there be anything that displeases them, I beg them also to impute it to the fault of my want of ability, and not to my will, who would very gladly have said better if I had had the power. For our Book says 'all that is written is written for our doctrine' and that is my intention. Wherefore I beseech you meekly for the mercy of God to pray for me, that Christ have mercy on me and forgive me my sins: and especially for my translations and enditings of worldly vanities, which I revoke in my retractions: as are the book of *Troilus;** also the book of *Fame*; the book of *The Nineteen Ladies*; the book of *The Duchess*; the book of St *Valentine's Day of the Parliament of Fowls*; *The Tales of Canterbury*, those that tend towards sin; the book of *The Lion*; and many another book, if they were in my memory; and many a song and many a lecherous lay; that Christ in his great mercy forgive me the sin.

But the translation of Boethius *De Consolatione*, and other books of Saints' legends, of homilies, and morality and devotion, for them I thank our Lord Jesu Christ and His blissful Mother, and all the Saints of Heaven; beseeching them that they henceforth, to my life's end, send me grace to bewail my sins and to study the salvation of my soul; and grant me the grace of true penitence, confession and satisfaction, that I may perform them in this present life, through the benign grace of Him that is King of kings and Priest over all priests, who bought us with the precious blood of His heart; so that I may be one of those that at the Day of Judgement shall be saved. *Qui cum Patre*, etc.

Here ends the book of the *Tales of Canterbury* compiled by Geoffrey Chaucer, on whose soul Jesu Christ have mercy.

Amen.

NOTES

In preparing this translation I have used the texts as they appear in standard editions by W. W. Skeat in seven volumes (Oxford 1894–7) and by F. N. Robinson in one volume (Cambridge, Mass., 1933; also Oxford). The texts in these two editions are naturally not identical. I have generally referred to both, and where there seemed to be a discrepancy that could affect a translation I have made my own choice. I have followed the order of the tales as it is given by Skeat rather than that given by Robinson.

The notes which follow derive very largely from both these authorities and from other works of reference I have from time to time consulted, They correspond to the asterisks in the text.

Page

3 *Martyr.* St Thomas à Becket of Canterbury.

4 *The Knight's campaigning.*

Alexandria. Taken and immediately after abandoned by Pierre de Lusignan, King of Cyprus, in 1365.

Algeciras. Besieged and taken from the Moorish King of Granada in 1344.

Ayas in Armenia, taken from the Turks by Pierre de Lusignan in about the year 1367.

Attalia, on the south coast of Asia Minor, taken by Pierre de Lusignan soon after 1352.

Tramissene, now called Tlemcen or Tremessen in western Algeria.

Balat is a conjecture for the original *Palatye* and occupies the former site of Miletus.

7 *Gaudies.* Every eleventh bead in a rosary stands for a paternoster and is called a 'gaudy'.

8 *A Limiter.* A begging friar who was granted a district to beg in, to limit his activities.

Four Orders. The four Orders of mendicant friars, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Carmelites, and the Austin Friars.

11 *St Paul's.* Lawyers used to meet for consultation at the portico of St Paul's cathedral.

12 *A Franklin.* A class of landowner, a freeholder, who is also free by birth, but not noble. It is noteworthy that his self-conscious chatter about gentility when he politely interrupts the Squire is contemptuously interrupted by the Host.

14 *Images.* The Doctor worked by what Chaucer calls 'Natural Magic' (here translated as 'the powers of favourable planets'). Small images or effigies, mouided, probably in wax, to represent the patient, or other sorts of talisman or text, would be hung on the patient at hours when his horoscope indicated that the planets were favourably placed for him, in relation to the zodiac; at such hours (as if by what we call 'cosmic rays') virtue was believed to descend into these images, etc., and thence to the patient, with healing effect. Faith is a great healer.

Dry, cold, moist or hot. A man's body was conceived as being composed of the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire in due proportions. *Earth* was thought to be cold and dry, *water* cold and moist, *air* hot and moist, *fire* hot and dry. Diseases were thought to be due to an imbalance in one or more of these qualities. A man's character could be roughly defined by reference to them, and their proportion decided his 'humour', e.g. a *sanguine* man (like the Franklin) was held to be hot and moist, which gave him the character of being a laughing, amorous, high-coloured, fleshy, good-natured fellow, with many desires and capacities. A *choleric* man (like the Reeve) was thought to be hot and dry. There were also *melancholy* men (cold and dry) and *phlegmatic* men (cold and moist).

Aesculapius and other medical authorities:

Aesculapius, mythical son of Apollo and Coronis, who learnt the art of medicine from Cheiron the Centaur, and whom Zeus struck by lightning for having restored too many people to life. He had a daughter called Hygieia and a temple was built to him, when after death he was deified as the god of medicine, at Epidaurus.

Hippocrates, the most famous physician of antiquity, born at Cos about 460 B.C.

Dioscorides, a Greek physician who lived in Cilicia in the first century A.D., with some of whose opinions Chaucer appears, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and elsewhere, to have been familiar.

Galen, a physician and a voluminous author on medical subjects, born at Pergamus in Mysia, who studied at Smyrna, Corinth, and Alexandria and practised in Rome. Approximate dates 130–201 A.D.

Rhazes, a Spanish Arab doctor of the tenth century.

Hali, Serapion and Avicenna were Arabian physicians and astronomers of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Averroes, a Moorish medical author who lived in Morocco in the twelfth century.

Scotch Bernard. Bernard Gordon, professor of medicine at Montpellier about the year 1300.

John of Gaddesden, a medical authority educated at Merton College, Oxford, who died in 1361.

Gilbertine, supposed to be Gilbertus Magnus, an Englishman who flourished towards the middle of the thirteenth century, wrote books about medicine, and is said to have been Chancellor at Montpellier.

19 *A Reeve.* A steward or minor official on an estate, generally an intermediary between a lord and his serfs.

20 *A Summoner.* One paid to summon sinners to trial before an ecclesiastical court. For further details of his profession see the opening of the *Friar's Tale.*

Cherubin. In medieval art the Cherubim are generally depicted with flame-coloured faces.

Questio quid juris. 'The question is, what is the point in law?'

21 *A Pardoner.* As the name implies, one who has authority (from the Pope) to sell pardons and indulgences, though not necessarily in holy orders.

58 *Dana*, a modernization of the name *Dane* as it is here found in Chaucer. He meant Daphne of course, who, being so inhuman as to flee the embraces of Apollo, was turned into a laurel. Her preserved virginity qualifies her for representation in Diana's temple.

65 *By the three forms*: in Heaven, Luna. On earth, *Diana.* In Hell, *Proserpina.* As in Keats' sonnet on Homer:

> Such seeing hadst thou as it once befell
> To Dian, Queen of earth and heaven and hell.

76 *Could not be expelled.* Chaucer is here airing his technical knowledge of contemporary physiology. Three forces or virtues were believed to control the life in a human body: the 'animal' virtues in the brain, the 'natural' in the liver, and the 'vital' in the heart. The 'animal' controlled all muscles, and therefore should have been able to expel the poison from Arcita's liver. But he was too far gone.

87 *A voice like Pilate's.* Miracle plays represented Herod and Pilate as huffing roarers and braggarts. Their lines generally carry heavy alliteration.

93 *Money.* More useful in a town than in the country where there are fewer things to buy.

97 *Him that harrowed Hell.* When Christ descended into Hell He led away therefrom Adam, Eve, the Patriarchs, St John the Baptist, and others, redeemed and at last released. This act was commonly called 'The harrowing of Hell' in the middle ages and was the subject of several miracle plays. The original story comes from the Gospel of Nicodemus in the Apocryphal

110 *Solar Hall.* So called because of its large sunny windows. Its official name was King's Hall, having been founded by Edward III. Later it was merged in what is now called Trinity College.

111 *And how's your canny daughter?* In Chaucer's original the two young northerners from Strother, Alan and John, are made to talk in northern dialect and idiom, for instance, the forms *swa* for *so*, *bathe* for *both*, *raa* for a *roe* are used by them. So far as I know this is the first time dialect occurs for comic effect in English fiction. As a page to the Duchess of Clarence, Chaucer would have spent time in Yorkshire (at Hatfield), and he may have picked up the peculiarities of northern speech there and then. I have attempted to reproduce this peculiarity with the help of Mr H. S. Taylor of Exeter College, Oxford, and Mr J. D. O'Connor, of the Department of Phonetics, University College, London, who have been so kind as to suggest such northern forms as I have used, e.g. *wor* for *our*. *Canny* here represents *faire* in the original. I am told that in Durham they say *canny* when they mean fair, pretty, or attractive.

118 *Bromeholme.* A piece of wood, said to be of the true cross, known as the Rood of Bromeholme, much venerated in Norfolk.

120 *Jack of Dover.* The authorities disagree as to what this expression means. Some think it is a fish, others that it is a pie that has been cooked, allowed to cool, and then has been cooked again to freshen it up when rather stale.

121 *Led with minstrelsy to jail.* Skeat notes that in those days when disorderly persons were carried to prison they were preceded by minstrels, in order to call public attention to their disgrace.

122 *Artificial day*, that is, from dawn to sunset, as opposed to the 'natural day' of twenty-four hours.

124 *Ceix and Halcyon.* Their story occurs in Chaucer's first long original poem, *The Book of the Duchess, c.* 1369.

The Legend of Cupid's Saints. Better known as *The Legend of Good Women,* composed towards 1386 by Chaucer at the command of the Queen in expiation for his supposed defamation of women in the person of Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde.* The list of these tender creatures as given by the Man of Law does not precisely tally with those whose tales are told in the *Legend*, but is near enough for the Man of Law.

Apollonius. This horror, whether real or pretended on Chaucer's part, is supposed by some to be a dig at his close friend the poet John Gower, who relates this tale in his *Confessio Amantis*, but he says nothing about 'pavement-wooing'.

125 *Metamorphoses.* There is an account in this work of Ovid, Bk. V, where the daughters of Pierus vied with the Muses and were transformed into

126 *Double-aces.* There was a game called *Hazard* in which dice were thrown. Double-aces was the lowest throw, fives and sixes a high one.

131 *First cause of motion,* etc. Skeat notes that the old, Ptolemaic astronomy supposed the earth stationary and central with nine spheres revolving about it. The seven innermost each carried a planet with it (Moon, Venus, Mercury, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn). The eighth sphere contained the fixed stars and was believed to have a slow motion from west to east. The ninth and outermost sphere was called the *primum mobile* or sphere of first motion, which was held to make a diurnal revolution from east to west that carried all else with it in the same direction, which is opposite to the 'natural' motion of the sun, which advances along the signs of the zodiac.

Scorpio. These contrary motions are suggested by Chaucer as the cause of the failure of Constance's marriage because of the evil influence of Mars in *Scorpio,* which is the house of death, battle, travail, and harm.

133 *O serpent masked in femininity.* Medieval poets and illuminators constantly represent Satan in Eden as a snake with a woman's face. This was perhaps because the serpent in Eden was a fallen angel, and, being an angel, had long hair, and having long hair looked like a woman.

137 *St Mary the Egyptian.* It is said that this St Mary, whose day is April 9th, was in early life loose in her morals, but being converted fled into the desert and lived forty-seven years there, beyond Jordan. She belonged to the fifth century.

156 *Johnny.* Sir John was a common name for a priest; *Lollards* were the strict but heretical followers of Wycliffe.

157 *Phislyas.* This word or, as it appears in some MSS., *phillyas* is thought by Skeat to be a corruption of some technical word in philosophy. It may be so, but perhaps the word is a deliberate piece of nonsense to underline the unlearnedness of the Skipper.

He has to clothe us. It is obvious that this passage was meant for a woman speaker, presumably the Wife of Bath. It is likely that Chaucer had at first designed the tale for her, then changed his mind (having found one that suited her even better) and unloaded this one on the Skipper without remembering these tell-tale lines.

162 *Ganelon of France.* The villain of the *Chanson de Roland* that betrayed Roland and Oliver who, with Archbishop Turpin, formed Charlemagne's rearguard at Roncesvalles against the Moors. Ganelon was torn asunder by four horses.

163 *Two in twelve.* The MSS. differ as to the proportion; some say ten in twelve, some twelve in twenty.

167 *Double entry.* In Chaucer's original the Merchant rebukes his wife for not having told him that the monk had repaid (which of course he had not) this trifling debt of 100 francs 'by redy token' and she, quite unabashed, says he has many slacker debtors than she is, and, if she fails, let him score it on her tally:

> and if so be I faille
> I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille.

making thereby a very obvious sexual jest, which is repeated in the last line of the Shipman's Tale:

> and God us sende
> Taylynge unough unto our lyves ende.

It is one of Chaucer's rare puns: the word *taille* equals *tail* and tail equals *tail-end* or *backside,* and taille equals *tally.*

Payment by tally consisted in the interchange of a notched stick, split in half, of which the debtor and creditor each retained half, and if the two halves 'tallied' the amount due was in no doubt because of the notches.

In trying to convey the feeling behind the use of this jest, I have dropped the now-archaic metaphor of paying by tally and substituted the more modern imagery of payment by double entry.

169 *Corpus Dominus.* The Host was no Latinist. He meant *corpus Domini,* the body of our Lord. He makes the same blunder later on.

197 *Zenobia* flourished A.D. 264 as Queen of Palmyra and was married to Odenathus, a Bedouin. Recognized by the Emperor Gallienus, she was attacked and defeated and led in triumph by the Emperor Aurelian, but survived to live in comfort.

201 *King Peter of Spain.* Skeat notes: 'He reigned over Castille and Leon from 1350 to 1362 and his conduct was marked by numerous acts of unprincipled atrocity.' There was a quarrel with his brother Enrique who stabbed him to the heart. This is the murder here lamented, though if Skeat's view be accepted it was no great loss. Chaucer takes his part because the Black Prince fought on his side against Enrique at the battle of Najera, 1367.

Upon an argent field. The second stanza of this 'tragedy' is written as a sort of heraldic riddle intermixed with puns. The arms described (argent, a double-headed eagle sable, displayed, debruised by a bend gules) are those of Bertrand Du Guesclin who 'brewed' the treason by luring King Peter into his brother's tent. The 'wicked nest' is a pun on the name of Sir Oliver Mauny (Mau is Old French for *wicked, nid* for *nest*), who was an accomplice according to Chaucer. Chaucer continues that this was not such an Oliver as that in the *Chanson de Roland,* loyal soldier of Charlemagne, but much more like Ganelon (the villain of the *Chanson*).

I suppose this emblematic way of expressing what occurred would have been easily intelligible to Chaucer's first audiences, but can see no way of

translating it so as to seem so to the modern reader without adding this long note.

King Peter of Cyprus. Pierre de Lusignan, ascended to the throne of Cyprus In 1352 and was assassinated in 1369. Chaucer's Knight seems to have seen service with him.

Bernabo Visconti, Duke of Milan, was deposed and died in prison in 1385. Chaucer knew him personally, though this does not show from what the Monk has to say. He went on the King's business to treat with him in 1378. The death of Bernabo is the most recent historical event mentioned in the *Canterbury Tales*.

203 *Dante*. See *Inferno* xxxii–xxxiii.

206 *Holofernes*, and

207 *Antiochus*. For both of these see the *Book of Judith* and 2 *Maccabees* ix in the *Apocrypha*.

208 *Alexander of Macedon*, the Great, 356–323 B.C. His dazzling career, high intelligence, and astounding magnanimity made him a legendary ideal of knightly soldiership in the middle ages.

209 *Aces*. The lowest possible throw of the dice in the game of *Hazard*.

210 *Brutus Cassius*. Chaucer supposed these two famous assassins to be one and the same.

215 *The equinoctial wheel*. I quote from Professor Robinson: 'A great circle of the heavens in the plane of the equator. According to the old astronomy it made a complete daily revolution so that 15 degrees would "ascend" every hour.' It was a popular belief in the time of Chaucer that cocks crew punctually on the hour.

216 *My Love is far from land*. The original, probably the refrain of a popular song, reads 'my lief is faren in londe' and means 'my love has gone away into foreign parts' but I could not resist the allusion to a song of our own, 'She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps.'

225 *Greek Sinon*. The Greek who tricked King Priam into admitting the Trojan Horse to Troy.

Bishop Bradwardine, a famous contemporary theologian, Proctor of Oxford University in 1325, and later Professor of Divinity and Chancellor.

Boethius, author of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* which Chaucer translated, was esteemed not only as a philosopher but also as a musician. In the fifth book of his great work there is a long argument on the subject of Predestination and Free Will on which Chaucer many times pondered and drew as a writer. He was a very learned poet, but carried his learning lightly. Boethius lived c. A.D. 470–525.

226 *Physiologus*. I quote from Tyrwhitt, 'a book in Latin metre entitled *Physiologus de Naturis xii Animalium*, by one Theobaldus, whose age is not known. The Chapter *De Sirenis* begins thus:

Sirenae sunt monstra resonantia magnis vocibus, etc.'

227 *Burnel the Ass*. A poem by Nigel Wireker of the twelfth century. The tale alluded to is that of a priest's son who broke a rooster's leg by throwing a stone at it. In revenge the bird declined to crow in the morning on the day when the priest was to be ordained and receive a benefice, so the priest failed to wake up in time and being late for the ceremony lost his preferment.

228 *Geoffrey* is Geoffrey de Vinsauf, an author on the art of Rhetoric who flourished in the twelfth century. In his work *De Nova Poetria* there is an intricate passage about the death of Richard Cœur de Lion to exhibit the art of apostrophe and playing upon words. Fridays come in for ingenious abuse. Chaucer, who derived a great deal of his stylistic manner from a sane use of the rules of rhetoric as laid down by his 'dear and sovereign master', is here poking gentle fun at him. It may be observed that the whole of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a farrago of rhetorical fireworks which must have made the poem far funnier to the fourteenth century, trained in such matters, than it is to us. I suppose a fair comparison would be between the delight taken in Pope's *Rape of the Lock* by a reader who knew the *Aeneid* and the delight taken in it by one who did not. The penalties of barbarism are heavy.

229 *Jack Straw* was one of the leaders of the riots in London during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, according to Walsingham's Chronicle. He and his gang massacred a number of Flemings in the Vintry, and he was later captured and decapitated.

247 *In neighbouring regions*. There were regulations against the mixture of wines. Lepe wine is light by nature, but may have been fortified with spirit for export. He is ironically suggesting that – as one cannot, of course, suspect an honest Fish Street vintner of deliberately mixing his wines – one can only suppose the mixture to occur spontaneously, thanks to the geographical proximity of Spain and France. I am told by Mr Warner Allen that this seems the first mention of the practice of fortifying wines that he has come upon in his researches.

249 *Hailes*. In Gloucestershire; the abbey ruins can still be seen. It formerly possessed a phial of Christ's blood; later publicly destroyed at St Paul's Cross by order of Henry VIII.

256 *Avicenna*. An Arabian physician (A.D. 980–1037) who wrote a work on medicines that includes a chapter on poisons.

263 *Ptolemy*. Claudius Ptolemacus, an astronomer of the second century whose chief work was known as his *Almagest*, an Arabic corruption of its title in Greek. His astronomical theories are those on which all medieval astronomy was based. His general wisdom also was proverbial.

264 *Dunmow*. The prize of a flitch of bacon for the married pair that can swear, after a year and a day of matrimony, that they have never had a quarrel, or regretted their marriage, and that if they were both free to choose again, would make the same choice. This is said to have been an annual event (save for the years in which no candidates presented themselves); it is also mentioned in *Piers Plowman*. I am grateful to Mr J. J. R. Philpott of Dunmow for the information that the flitch is now offered every four years, in the month of June.

268 *Three misfortunes*. She is alluding to Proverbs xxx, 21–3. 'For three things the earth is disquieted, and for four which it cannot bear; for a servant when he reigneth; and a fool when he is filled with meat; for an odious woman when she is married; and an handmaid that is heir to her mistress.'

276 *Theophrastus and Valerius*. A work attributed to Walter Map, a wit and cynic who flourished about A.D. 1200. The subject of the work here referred to is *De non ducenda uxore*, a satire on matrimony.

277 *Children of Mercury*. Learning was held to be under the protection of Mercury; his 'children' are scholars, who in those days were generally celibate.

278 *Pasiphaë*. Wife of Minos, King of Crete. She fell in love with a white bull and became the mother of the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull.

286 *Sovereignty*. To realize the full force of the Knight's answer it may help to glance at the Introduction, pp. xii–xiii.

305 *Trentals*. An office of thirty masses for the souls of those in Purgatory. The gibe about their being 'very quickly sung' a few lines later refers to the official view that the soul in question could not be released until the whole thirty had been sung. Thus it was held reasonable and charitable to sing them one after another, all on the same day if possible, so as not to keep the soul lingering in Purgatory longer than was necessary. Those who sang these masses were naturally paid for their work.

Qui cum Patre. The conventional close of a sermon, 'Who with the Father,' etc.

308 *Jubilee*. After serving fifty years in a Convent friars were permitted to go about alone.

310 *Cor meum eructavit*. The opening words of Psalm xlv, 'My heart is inditing of a good matter,' which less poetically rendered could mean, 'My heart is belching a good matter.'

321 *Petrarch*. Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), the Italian poet and humanist, crowned poet laureate at Rome in 1341. Among many other more famous literary works he translated the story of Griselda into Latin from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and it is from this translation that Chaucer seems to have taken his matter for the *Clerk's Tale*. Some have thought that this passage is autobiographical and that Chaucer himself met Petrarch in Italy in 1372, and got the story from him then. More recent scholarship has cast grave doubt on this.

Lynian. Giovanni di Legnano, Professor of Law at Bologna, 1363, died 1383. Wrote tractates on war and on astrology.

355 *Chaucer's Envoy*. This send-off to the tale of Griselda is in Chaucer's most mature vein of playful irony. It is also one of his trickiest miracles of rhyming. It is conjectured that the tale of Griselda was written long before he ever thought of the *Canterbury Tales* as such; stylistically it seems to me more skilful than the *Second Nun's Tale* (perhaps his first effort at telling a story) and less skilful than the *Man of Law's*. All three are of a pious or moral cast, and all three are in 'rhyme royal' stanza form. *Troilus and Criseyde is* also in this stanza form, but is far more mature in style. It would seem that in later life Chaucer, while wishing to include his earlier tale of Griselda among the *Canterbury Tales*, felt it needed a touch of irony to mitigate its doormat morality for wives. In four manuscripts the *Clerk's Tale* ends two stanzas before Chaucer's *Envoy*, and it is followed by a genuine, but ultimately rejected stanza that may be rendered as follows:

> Now when this worthy clerk had told his tale
> Our Host swore heartily, 'God's bones, that's good!
> It would be better than a barrel of ale
> To have had my wife to hear that tale, it would.
> Well, it was noble and there's much I could
> Have got from it if you but knew, say I.
> When something can't be done, better not try.'

On consideration, however, Chaucer seems to have transferred the Host's comment about his wife and the barrel of ale to the colloquy after Chaucer's *Tale of Melibèe* and to have indulged an ironical flight of his maturer fancy by adding the *Envoy* which follows the *Clerk's Tale*, and the two preceding verses which (in this version) begin:

> But one word more, my lords, before I go.

These and the *Envoy* are in his most skilful and experienced manner; there isn't a line of padding in them and the dexterity of his rhymes is a miracle. I have attempted to reproduce it, but if I may again quote from my version of the *Clerk's Tale*:

> This world of ours, it has to be confessed,
> Is not so sturdy as it was of old.

355 *Chichevache*. In an old French fable there were two cows called

Chichevache and Bicorne. Bicorne was fat because she made her diet on patient husbands who were in plentiful supply. But the monster Chichevache was thin, for her diet was only patient wives, poor cow.

361 *The Boat of Wade.* Wade was a hero of Anglo-Saxon antiquity to whom there are several scattered references outside Chaucer, but nothing is now known about this subtle boat of his except that its name was *Guingelot.*

383 *Jesus son of Sirach.* The supposed author of *Ecclesiasticus.*

389 *Cambuskan.* I have adopted Milton's spelling for this name from his famous praise of the tale in *Il Penseroso.* Skeat notes that the name in Chaucer (Cambinskan) was intended by him for the name more familiar to us of Genghis Khan, though the account here given of him suits his grandson Kublai Khan better.

391 *Gawain.* A knight of the Round Table, distinguished, though not specially so in Malory, for his extreme courtesy. A noble, alliterative romance, contemporary with Chaucer, describes his adventures with a Green Knight of magical powers in whose castle Gawain was staying. The Green Knight's lady makes love to Gawain and he is in a cleft stick, for it would seem as discourteous to refuse her as to cuckold his host. Gawain's perfect manners, however, are equal to the occasion and he offends neither.

395 *Alhazen and Witelo.* Alhazen was an Arabian astronomer who died A.D. 1039. Witelo was a Polish mathematician of the thirteenth century.

396 *Aldiran.* The name of a star in the constellation of Leo, identified by Skeat as the star θ Hydrae.

402 *A pup.* The proverb here referred to is 'Beat the dog before the lion', meaning that if you chastise a smaller creature in sight of a larger, the larger will take warning. One can see the application of this in the political field. Repress a minor rebel and a greater enemy may think twice before attacking.

A tercelet. The technical term for a male falcon or hawk.

406 *Velvet blue.* Blue for Chaucer's age was the colour of constancy in love and green of lightness in love. This is echoed in *'Greensleeves is my delight'* and elsewhere. The fickle birds were depicted on the outside to imply that such could never enter within the mew, where all was constancy. So in the *Roman de la Rose*, the walls of the garden of love are decorated *on the outside* with the figures of poverty, old age, hypocrisy, etc., which are never to be admitted in the land of true love.

409 *Cithero.* He means Cicero, of course, famous for all the 'figures' and 'colours' of rhetoric. These are technical names for various known devices of style, such as those referred to towards the end of the *Nun's Priest's Tale.*

414 *Without cup.* The sense of this proverbial phrase is that he drank misery straight from the cask and not in small portions, cup by cup.

419 *Pamphilus for Galatea.* This is not an error for Pygmalion and Galatea but refers according to Skeat to a long poem in barbarous Latin by one Pamphilus, declaring his love.

424 *Alnath.* The name still of a star of first magnitude known to astronomers as α Arietis. Chaucer was himself a considerable astronomer and wrote a treatise on the Astrolabe. The whole of this passage about the magician's calculations is highly technical and exact. Being no astronomer myself I have translated it with as much understanding as I could bring to bear on it, with frequent recourse to the full notes on pages 393–5 of the fifth volume of Skeat's large edition of Chaucer's works. Those interested in medieval science may there learn the astounding complexity of detail which underlies the bland verses of Chaucer, though he appears to assume that his readers will take it all for granted. The Franklin has just said that he 'lacks the jargon of astrology' ('I can no termes of astrologye') but all the same he makes no blunders, it seems. I hope I have been able to follow his example.

426 *Phido.* The whole of this speech is a set piece of medieval rhetoric in spite of the Franklin's disclaimer in his Prologue. It begins with the figure of *apostrophe* and passes to a long *digressio* built out of *exempla* from ancient history. All the instances of female fidelity that sprang to Dorigen's mind rose from authentic sources in Chaucer's reading which can be found in the notes to Skeat's or Robinson's edition of his works. On consideration I have thought it would be tedious to repeat them here.

436 The interpretations of the name *Cecilia*: (1) *coeli lilia*, lily of heaven; (2) *caecis via*, the way for the blind; (3) *coelum* (contemplation of Heaven) and Leah (type of the Active Life); (4) *quasi caecitate carens*, 'as if lacking in blindness'; (5) *coelum* and λεώς, heaven in Latin and people in Greek. Hence a heaven for people to gaze at.

438 *Urban.* Pope Urban I, martyred by beheading 25 May A.D. 230.

450 *A canon of the church.* I do not know why Chaucer could so certainly infer the man was a canon because his hood and cloak were sewn together. Before the Reformation there were two types of canon, regular canons who lived under one roof, cloistered after the manner of monks, and secular canons who could roam about, after the manner of friars. This canon appears to have been a secular.

455 *Orpiment.* Trisulphide of arsenic. I understand from the historians of medieval science that all the details of alchemical technique described by Chaucer are accurate and reliable in so far as they can be checked. Some have thought they indicate a first-hand knowledge and that the indignation of the canon's yeoman against the frauds practised in this business reflects a personal indignation of Chaucer's at having been fleeced himself. It may be so, but I should have thought he was too fly for any alchemist.

456 *Water in rubefaction.* Two mysterious processes – the rubefaction and

albefaction of waters, i.e. reddening and whitening or clarifying a liquid – appear to play an important part in such experiments and are referred to in medieval textbooks of alchemy. For instance there is what Skeat calls 'a long and unintelligible passage about *rubrificatio*' in the *Theatrum Chemicum* printed in 1659. Alchemy dragged on into the eighteenth century.

Realgar. Disulphide of arsenic.

Citrination. Turning yellow. It was part of the theory that when the ingredients began to turn yellow they were on the verge of becoming the Philosopher's Stone, by which all could be turned to gold. The Philosopher's Stone was held to be heavy, sweet-smelling, constant, and pink, and to exist in powder form as well; as in this tale.

473 *Arnold.* Arnoldus de Villa Nova, a French physician, theologian, astrologer, and alchemist who lived between 1235 and 1314. He wrote the treatise on alchemy mentioned in the next line. I cannot explain more of what is said of 'the dragon and his brother' than appears in the text.

474 *Chimica Senioris Zadith Tabula.* Printed in the *Theatrum Chemicum* (1659). The anecdote here attributed to Plato appears there attributed to Solomon.

Ignotum per ignotius. Literally 'an unknown thing (explained by) a more unknown thing'.

475 *Dun's in the mire.* An allusion to a parlour game. A large log is brought into the parlour, and placed centrally. The cry goes up 'Dun's in the mire!' (i.e. the dun horse is stuck in the mud). Two of the company then try to drag it out; if they fail, others join them one by one. This makes for agreeable scrimmages.

476 *Monkey-wine.* This will be a really interesting note. In the middle ages the learned recognized four states or stages of drunkenness, which corresponded to the four 'humours' or dispositions of man: lion-drunk, or *choleric*; ape-drunk, or *sanguine*; mutton-drunk or *phlegmatic*; swine-drunk, or *melancholy*.

In this passage the Manciple describes the Cook as *pale*, and therefore he cannot be *sanguine*; for the sanguine humour was supposed to be ruddy-hued. Yet he is described as having drunk monkey-wine. The original Chaucer reads:

> I trowe that ye dronken han *wyn ape*,
> *And that is when men pleyen with a straw.*

Up till now, the last of these two lines has been understood to mean that a drunkard will toy with any trifle. But I hope to show it is far more interesting than that. It leads us into the whole question of Chaucer's knowledge of drunkenness. Chaucer's family had been in the wine-trade for at least two generations, and he himself was a Customs Officer working at the Port of London, a fact which will be seen to have a bearing on this matter. The Manciple notes that the Cook is *pale*. The Host adds that he is snuffling, or breathing thickly. Another of Chaucer's pale drunkards is the miller in the *Reeve's Tale*; he too breathes as if he had *asthma*; the asthmatic aspect of the drunkard is brought out again in the Pardoner's Tale, where the noise of a drunkard's breathing is said to sound as if he were saying '*Samson-Samson*'. *Pallor* and *stertorousness* are therefore two Chaucerian characteristics of the drunken.

The interest of all this lies in some further evidence I received in a letter from the late Dr R. N. Salaman, who wrote to me just before his death about this passage. He said that when he was a young doctor at the London Docks, men were occasionally brought to him for attention, after having been found insensibly drunk in a wine-warehouse. They had crept in the night before and applied themselves to the liquor. In due course they were prostrate on the floor, where they developed pneumonia from which, in almost every case, they died. Dr Salaman said that they were all unnaturally pale and even blue in the face, and that they breathed stertorously. When he asked those who carried in the patient how he had come into such a condition, the answer invariably was *'He's been sucking the monkey!'* – a piece of Dock slang, as Dr Salaman then thought. On inquiring what it implied, he was told it meant drilling a tiny hole in a cask of wine and sucking out the liquor *through a straw*. This meaning I find corroborated in Partridge's *Dictionary of English Slang*.

What then had happened? I conjecture that the learned medieval joke about the four animals and their wines and humours, before Chaucer's time, had already passed in garbled form into Dock folklore, where Chaucer would have heard and seized upon it. *Playing with a straw* is thus a sharper and more terrible image to describe the monkey-drunk Cook than we had thought. A further interesting note has been supplied to me by Mr R. A. Salaman, son to my first informant, who writes:

'In spare time I am collecting material for an illustrated Dictionary of tradesmen's hand-tools. Among the appliances of the cellarman is the *Velincher* . . . a pipette for drawing out samples of liquor from a bung-hole, or through a hole bored in the side of the cask with a special gimlet . . . the Velincher, according to Knight's *Dictionary of Mechanics*, is sometimes called a thief-tube, and the *sucking-tube* or *monkey-pump*, as sailors call it, is a straw or quill introduced through a gimlet-hole . . . Xenophon describes this mode of pilfering the wine-jars of Armenia.'

485 *Divided in like pattern proportionally.* In the original the phrase seems also somewhat roundabout. What Chaucer means is that his height is to his shadow as six is to eleven.

Saturn. According to Skeat's note the original, which names the

exaltation of the moon as identified with *Libra*, is a mistake on the part of Chaucer or one of his scribes for the exaltation of Saturn. I have therefore followed Skeat rather than Chaucer at this point.

486 *Rum-ram-ruf by letter.* The Parson disclaims the power to tell a romance in the alliterative style of composition common at the time. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, already mentioned in these notes (note to page 391), would be an example of one.

489 *Troilus.* For a brief account of most of the works here mentioned by Chaucer see the Introduction (page xv). The book of *The Lion* has been lost, but it is conjectured to be a translation from the French of Machault, a work called *Le Dit du Lion*, composed in 1342.