

# The Longman Anthology of British Literature

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THE MIDDLE AGES

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*THE MILLER'S TALE* *The Miller's Tale* both answers and parodies *The Knight's Tale*, a long aristocratic romance about two knights in rivalry for the hand of a lady. While the Miller tells a nearly analogous story of erotic competition, his tale is radically shorter and explicitly sexual. Such brevity and physicality fit his tale's genre—a fabliau, or short comic tale, usually bawdy and often involving a clerk, a wife, and a cuckolded husband. Following the convention (if not the reality) that romances were written by and for the nobility and fabliaux by and for the commons, Chaucer suits *The Miller's Tale* to its teller as aptly as he does the Knight's. Slyly disclaiming responsibility for the tale, he explains its bawdiness by the Miller's class status: "the Millere is a cherle" and like his peer the Reeve who follows and "requites" him, tells "harlotrye."

The drunken Miller's insistence on telling his tale to requite the Knight's tale has been called a "literary peasants' revolt." Although the Miller, a free man, was not actually a peasant, yeomen of his status were active in the Rising of 1381, and millers in particular played a symbolic role in it (see the letters of John Ball, page 461). In fact, this tale is highly literate, with its echoes of the Song of Songs and its parody of the language of courtly love: an actual miller would have had neither the education nor the social sophistication to tell it. Yet a parody implies some degree of attachment to the very model being ridiculed, and *The Miller's Tale* is as much a claim upon the Knight's world as a repudiation of it. The Miller wants to "quiten" the Knight's tale, he says, using a word that can mean to repay or avenge, but also to fulfill. The tale's several plots converge brilliantly upon a single cry: "Water!" The tale's impact derives as well from its plenitude of pleasures (sexual, comic, even religious) after the austere and rigid desires of *The Knight's Tale*.

## The Miller's Tale

### *The Introduction*

Whan that the Knight hadde thus his tale ytold, In al the route <sup>o</sup> nas ther yong ne old That he ne saide it was a noble storye, And worthy for to drawen <sup>o</sup> to memorye, 5 And namely the gentils <sup>o</sup> everichoon. Oure Hoste lough <sup>o</sup> and swor, "So mote I goon, <sup>1</sup> This gooth aright: unboked is the male. <sup>2</sup> Lat see now who shal telle another tale. For trewely the game is wel bigonne. 10 Now telleth ye, sire Monk, if that ye conne, <sup>o</sup> Somwhat to quite <sup>o</sup> with the Knightes tale." The Millere, that for dronken was al pale, So that unnethe <sup>o</sup> upon his hors he sat, He nolde avalen <sup>o</sup> neither hood ne hat, 15 Ne abiden no man for his curteisye, But in Pilates <sup>3</sup> vois he gan to crye, And swor, "By armes and by blood and bones, <sup>o</sup> I can <sup>o</sup> a noble tale for the nones, With which I wol now quite the Knightes tale." 20 Oure Hoste sawgh that he was dronke of ale, And saide, "Abide, <sup>o</sup> Robin, leve <sup>o</sup> brother, Som bettre man shal telle us first another. Abide, and lat us werken thriftily." <sup>o</sup> "By Goddes soule," quod he, "that wol nat I,	group  recall upper class laughed  know repay  barely would not remove  (of Christ) know  wait / dear  properly
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1. Thus I may proceed.

2. The bag is opened (i.e., the games are begun).

3. The role of Pilate was traditionally played in a loud and raucous voice in the mystery plays.

- 25 For I wol speke or elles go my way."  
 Oure Host answerde, "Tel on, a devele way!<sup>o</sup> *in the devil's name*  
 Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."  
 "Now herkneþ," quod the Millere, "alle and some.<sup>o</sup> *one and all*
- 30 But first I make a protestacioun  
 That I am dronke: I knowe it by my soun.<sup>o</sup> *sound*  
 And therefore if that I mis speke or saye,  
 Wite it<sup>o</sup> the ale of Southwerk, I you praye; *blame it on*  
 For I wol telle a legende and a lif<sup>4</sup>  
 Bothe of a carpenter and of his wif,  
 35 How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe."<sup>5</sup>  
 The Reeve answerde and saide, "Stint thy clappe!<sup>o</sup> *hold your tongue*  
 Lat be thy lewed<sup>o</sup> drunken harlotrye.<sup>o</sup> *unlearned / obscenity*  
 It is a sinne and eek a greet folye  
 To apairen<sup>o</sup> any man or him defame, *injure*  
 40 And eek to bringen wives in swich fame.  
 Thou maist ynough of othere thinges sayn."  
 This dronken Millere spak ful soone again,  
 And saide, "Leve brother Osewold,  
 Who hath no wif, he is no cokewold.<sup>o</sup> *cuckold*
- 45 But I saye nat therfore that thou art oon.  
 Ther ben ful goode wives many oon,  
 And evere a thousand goode ayains oon badde.<sup>o</sup> *against one bad*  
 That knowestou wel thyself but if thou madde.<sup>o</sup> *go insane*  
 Why artou angry with my tale now?  
 50 I have a wif, pardee,<sup>o</sup> as wel as thou, *by God*  
 Yet nolde I, for the oxen in my plough,<sup>6</sup>  
 Take upon me more than ynough  
 As deemen<sup>o</sup> of myself that I were oon:<sup>o</sup> *judge / one (a cuckold)*  
 I wol bileve wel that I am noon.
- 55 An housbonde shal nought been inquisitif  
 Of Goddes privetee,<sup>o</sup> nor of his wif. *secrets*  
 So he may finde Goddes foison<sup>o</sup> there, *plenty*  
 Of the remenant needeth nought enquere."  
 What sholde I more sayn but this Millere
- 60 He nolde<sup>o</sup> his wordes for no man forbere, *would not*  
 But tolde his cherles<sup>o</sup> tale in his manere. *commoner's*  
 M'athinketh<sup>o</sup> that I shal reherce<sup>o</sup> it here, *I regret / repeat*  
 And therefore every gentil wight<sup>o</sup> I praye, *person*  
 Deemeth nought, for Goddes love, that I saye  
 65 Of yvel entente, but for<sup>o</sup> I moot<sup>o</sup> reherse *because / must*  
 Hir tales alle, be they bet or werse,  
 Or elles falsen som of my matere.  
 And therefore, whoso list it nought yheere  
 Turne over the leef,<sup>o</sup> and chese<sup>o</sup> another tale, *page / choose*
- 70 For he shal finde ynowe,<sup>o</sup> grete and smale, *enough*  
 Of storial<sup>o</sup> thing that toucheth gentillesse,<sup>o</sup> *historical / nobility*  
 And eek moralitee and holinesse:

4. The story of a saint's life.

5. Made a fool of the carpenter.

6. Yet I wouldn't, not even (in wager) for the oxen in my plough.



Blameth nought me if that ye chese amis.  
 The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this,  
 75 So was the Reeve eek, and othere mo,  
 And harlotrye they tolden bothe two.  
 Aviseth you,<sup>o</sup> and putte me out of blame:  
 And eek men shal nought maken earnest of game.<sup>o</sup>

*be warned  
 treat jokes seriously*

### The Tale

Whilom<sup>o</sup> ther was dwelling at Oxenforde  
 80 A riche gnof<sup>o</sup> that gestes heeld to boorde,<sup>o</sup>  
 And of his craft he was a carpenter.  
 With him ther was dwelling a poore scoler,  
 Hadde lerned art,<sup>7</sup> but al his fantasye<sup>o</sup>  
 Was turned for to lere<sup>o</sup> astrologye,  
 85 And coude a certain of conclusiouns,<sup>o</sup>  
 To deemen by interrogaciouns,<sup>8</sup>  
 If that men axed<sup>o</sup> him in certain houres  
 Whan that men sholde have droughte or elles showres,  
 Or if men axed him what shal bifalle  
 90 Of every thing—I may nat rekene<sup>o</sup> hem alle.  
 This clerk was cleped<sup>o</sup> hende<sup>9</sup> Nicholas.  
 Of derne<sup>o</sup> love he coude, and of solas,<sup>1</sup>  
 And therto he was sly and ful privee,<sup>o</sup>  
 And lik a maide meeke for to see.  
 95 A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye<sup>o</sup>  
 Allone, withouten any compaignye,  
 Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote,<sup>2</sup>  
 And he himself as sweete as is the roote  
 Of licoris or any setewale.<sup>3</sup>  
 100 His Almageste<sup>4</sup> and bookes grete and smale,  
 His astrelabye,<sup>5</sup> longing for<sup>o</sup> his art,  
 His augrim stones,<sup>o</sup> layen faire apart  
 On shelves couched<sup>o</sup> at his beddes heed;  
 His presse<sup>o</sup> ycovered with a falding<sup>o</sup> reed;  
 105 And al above ther lay a gay sautrye,<sup>o</sup>  
 On which he made a-nightes melodye  
 So swetely that al the chambre roong,  
 And *Angelus ad Virginem*<sup>6</sup> he soong,  
 And after that he soong the *Kinges Note*:<sup>7</sup>  
 110 Ful often blessed was his merye throte.  
 And thus this sweete clerk his time spente  
 After his freendes finding and his rente.<sup>8</sup>  
 This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wif  
 Which that he loved more than his lif.

*long ago  
 fool / took in boarders*

*fancy  
 learn  
 predictions*

*asked*

*count*

*called*

*secret*

*secretive*

*inn*

*belonging to  
 abacus beads*

*arranged*

*dresser / coarse cloth*

*harp*

7. The arts curriculum (trivium).

8. To estimate by consulting (the stars).

9. Handsome, courteous, handy.

1. Pleasure, (sexual) comforts.

2. Elegantly decked out with sweet herbs.

3. Setwall, a gingerlike spice used as a stimulant.

4. An astrological treatise by Ptolemy.

5. Astrolabe, an astrological instrument.

6. A prayer commemorating the Annunciation.

7. A popular song.

8. According to what his friends gave him and his income.

115	Of eighteteene yeer she was of age; Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage, For she was wilde and yong, and he was old, And deemed <sup>o</sup> himself been lik a cokewold.	<i>supposed</i>
120	He knew nat Caton, <sup>9</sup> for his wit was rude, That bad men sholde wedde his similitude: <sup>o</sup> Men sholde wedden after hir estat, <sup>o</sup> For youthe and elde is often at debat. But sith that he was fallen in the snare, He moste endure, as other folk, his care.	<i>equal in age station in life</i>
125	Fair was this yonge wif, and therewithal As any wesele hir body gent and smal. <sup>1</sup> A ceint <sup>o</sup> she wered, barred <sup>o</sup> al of silk;	<i>belt / striped apron</i>
130	A barmcloth <sup>o</sup> as whit as morne milk Upon hir lendes, <sup>o</sup> ful of many a gore; <sup>o</sup> Whit was hir smok, <sup>o</sup> and broiden <sup>o</sup> al bifore And eek bihinde, on hir coler aboute, <sup>o</sup> Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute;	<i>loins / flounce slip / embroidered around her collar</i>
	The tapes <sup>o</sup> of hir white voluper <sup>o</sup> Were of the same suite <sup>o</sup> of hir coler;	<i>ribbons / cap pattern</i>
135	Hir filet <sup>o</sup> brood <sup>o</sup> of silk and set ful hye; And sikerly she hadde a likerous yë; <sup>2</sup> Ful smale y pulled <sup>o</sup> were hir browes two, And tho <sup>o</sup> were bent, and blake as any slo. <sup>o</sup> She was ful more blisful on to see	<i>headband / broad  plucked they / plum</i>
140	Than is the newe perejonette <sup>o</sup> tree, And softer than the wolle is of a wether; <sup>o</sup> And by hir girdel <sup>o</sup> heeng a purs of lether, Tasseled with silk and perled <sup>o</sup> with latoun. <sup>o</sup> In al this world, to seeken up and down,	<i>pear ram belt decorated / brass</i>
145	Ther nis no man so wis that coude thenche <sup>o</sup> So gay a popelote <sup>o</sup> or swich a wenche. <sup>3</sup> Ful brighter was the shining of hir hewe Than in the Towr the noble <sup>o</sup> yforged newe. <sup>4</sup> But of hir song, it was as loud and yerne <sup>o</sup>	<i>imagine doll  gold coin lively</i>
150	As any swalwe sitting on a berne. Therto she coude skippe and make game As any kide or calf folwing his dame. <sup>o</sup> Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, <sup>o</sup> Or hoord of apples laid in hay or heeth. <sup>o</sup>	<i>mother honey drinks heather</i>
155	Winsing <sup>o</sup> she was as is a joly <sup>o</sup> colt, Long as a mast, and upright <sup>o</sup> as a bolt. <sup>o</sup> A brooch she bar upon hir lowe coler As brood as is the boos <sup>o</sup> of a bokeler; <sup>o</sup> Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.	<i>skittish / spirited strait / arrow  boss / shield</i>
160	She was a primerole, <sup>o</sup> a piggesnye, <sup>5</sup> For any lord to leggen in his bedde,	<i>primrose</i>

9. Cato, Latin author of a book of maxims used in elementary education.

1. Her body as delicate and slender as any weasel.

2. And certainly she had a wanton eye.

3. Woman of the working class.

4. Than the new-forged gold coin in the Tower (of London, the royal mint).

5. Pig's eye, a flower.

Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.

Now sire, and eft° sire, so bifel the cas again  
That on a day this hende Nicholas

165 Fil with this yonge wif to rage° and playe, sport  
Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye° Osney, near Oxford  
(As clerkes been ful subtil and ful quainte),° clever

And prively he caughte hire by the queinte,<sup>6</sup>  
And saide, "Ywis,° but if ich have my wille, certainly  
170 For derne° love of thee, lemman,° I spille,"° secret / sweetheart / die

And heeld hire harde by the haunche-bones,  
And saide, "Lemman, love me al atones,° at once  
Or I wol dien, also° God me save." so

And she sproong as a colt dooth in a trave,<sup>7</sup>  
175 And with hir heed she wried° faste away; twisted  
She saide, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fay.° faith  
Why, lat be," quod she, "lat be, Nicholas!

Or I wol crye 'Out, harrow, and allas!'  
Do way youre handes, for your curteisye!"

180 This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye,  
And spak so faire, and profred him° so faste, pressed his case

That she hir love him graunted atte laste,  
And swoor hir ooth by Saint Thomas of Kent  
That she wolde been at his comandement,  
185 Whan that she may hir leiser° wel espye. opportunity

"Myn housbonde is so ful of jalousye  
That but ye waite wel and been privee,<sup>8</sup>  
I woot° right wel I nam but deed,"° quod she. know / am no more than  
"Ye moste been ful derne° as in this cas." secret

190 "Nay, therof care thee nought," quod Nicholas.  
"A clerk hadde litherly biset his while,° wasted his time  
But if he coude a carpenter bigile."

And thus they been accorded and ysworn  
To waite a time, as I have told biforn.

195 Whan Nicholas hadde doon this everydeel,  
And thakked° hire upon the lendes° weel, patted / loins  
He kiste hire sweete, and taketh his sautrye,  
And playeth faste, and maketh melodye.

Thanne fil it thus, that to the parissh chirche,  
200 Cristes owene werkes for to wirche,  
This goode wif wente on an haliday:° holy day

Hir forheed shoon as bright as any day,  
So was it wasshen whan she leet° hir werk. left off

Now was ther of that chirche a parissh clerk,  
205 The which that was ycleped° Absolon: called  
Crul° was his heer, and as the gold it shoon, curly  
And strouted as a fanne° large and brode;

Ful straight and evene lay his joly shode.° part in his hair

6. Literally "dainty part," slang for the female genitals.

7. A restraint for horses when they are being shod.

8. That unless you're very cautious and discreet.

9. And spread out like a winnowing fan (for separating wheat from chaff)



	His rode <sup>o</sup> was reed, his y'n greye as goos.	complexion
210	With Poules window <sup>1</sup> corven <sup>o</sup> on his shoos, In hoses rede he wente fetisly. <sup>o</sup>	carved elegantly
	Yclad he was ful smale <sup>o</sup> and proprely, Al in a kirtel <sup>o</sup> of a light waget <sup>o</sup> —	fine tunic / blue
215	Ful faire and thikke been the pointes <sup>o</sup> set— And therupon he hadde a gay surplis, <sup>o</sup>	laces clerical robe
	As whit as is the blosme upon the ris. <sup>o</sup> A merye child <sup>o</sup> he was, so God me save.	twig lad
	Wel coude he laten blood, <sup>2</sup> and clippe, <sup>o</sup> and shave, And maken a chartre of land, or acquitaunce; <sup>o</sup>	cut hair legal release
220	In twenty manere coude he trippe and daunce After the scole of Oxenforde tho, And with his legges casten <sup>o</sup> to and fro, And playen songes on a smal rubible; <sup>o</sup>	fling fiddle
	Therto he soong somtime a loud quinible, <sup>o</sup> 225 And as wel coude he playe on a giterne: <sup>o</sup> In al the town nas brewhous ne taverne That he ne visited with his solas, <sup>3</sup>	high treble guitar
	Ther any gailard tappestere <sup>o</sup> was. But sooth to sayn, he was somdeel squaimous <sup>o</sup>	saucy barmaid somewhat squeamish
230	Of farting, and of speeche daungerous. <sup>o</sup> This Absolon, that joly was and gay, Gooth with a cencer <sup>o</sup> on the haliday,	haughty incense bowl
	Cencing the wives of the parisshe faste, And many a lovely look on hem he caste, 235 And namely on this carpenteres wif: To looke on hire him thoughte a merye lif. She was so propre and sweete and likerous, <sup>o</sup>	sexy
	I dar wel sayn, if she hadde been a mous, And he a cat, he wolde hire hente <sup>o</sup> anoon.	catch
240	This parisshe clerk, this joly Absolon, Hath in his herte swich a love-longinge That of no wif ne took he noon offringe— For curteisye he saide he wolde noon. The moone, whan it was night, ful brighte shoon,	
245	And Absolon his giterne hath ytake— For paramours he thoughte for to wake— <sup>4</sup> And forth he gooth, jolif <sup>o</sup> and amorous,	pretty
	Til he cam to the carpenteres hous, A litel after cokkes hadde ycrowe, 250 And dressed <sup>o</sup> him up by a shot-windowe <sup>o</sup>	placed / hinged window
	That was upon the carpenteres wal. He singeth in his vois gentil and smal, <sup>o</sup> “Now dere lady, if thy wille be, I praye you that ye wol rewe <sup>o</sup> on me,”	high take pity
255	Ful wel accordant <sup>o</sup> to his giterninge.	harmonizing

1. The windows of St. Paul's Chapel were intricately patterned.

2. Let blood (a medical treatment performed by barbers).

3. Entertainment (also with sexual connotations).

4. For the sake of love he thought to keep a vigil.

This carpenter awook and herde him singe,  
 And spak unto his wif, and saide anoon,  
 "What, Alison, heerestou nought Absolon  
 That chaunteth thus under oure bowres<sup>o</sup> wal?" *bedroom's*  
 And she answerde hir housbonde therwithal,  
 "Yis, God woot,<sup>o</sup> John, I heere it everydeel."<sup>o</sup> *knows / every bit*  
 This passeth forth. What wol ye bet than weel?<sup>5</sup>  
 Fro day to day this joly Absolon  
 So woweth<sup>o</sup> hire that him is wo-bigoon: *woos*  
 He waketh al the night and al the day;  
 He kembed<sup>o</sup> his lokkes brode<sup>o</sup> and made him gay; *combed / wide-spreading*  
 He woweth hire by menes and brocage,<sup>6</sup>  
 And swoor he wolde been hir owene page;<sup>o</sup> *attendant*  
 He singeth, brokking<sup>o</sup> as a nightingale; *trilling*  
 He sente hire piment,<sup>o</sup> meeth,<sup>o</sup> and spiced ale, *spiced wine / mead*  
 And wafres<sup>o</sup> piping hoot out of the gleede;<sup>o</sup> *pastries / coals*  
 And for she was of towne, he profred meede<sup>o</sup>— *bribes*  
 For som folk wol be wonnen for richesse,  
 And som for strokes,<sup>o</sup> and som for gentillesse. *by force*  
 Somtime to shewe his lightnesse<sup>o</sup> and maistrye,<sup>o</sup> *agility / skill*  
 He playeth Herodes<sup>7</sup> upon a scaffold<sup>o</sup> hye. *platform*  
 But what availeth him as in this cas?  
 She loveth so this hende Nicholas  
 That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;<sup>8</sup>  
 He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn. *fool*  
 And thus she maketh Absolon hir ape,<sup>o</sup> *joke*  
 And al his earnest turneth til a jape.<sup>o</sup> *true*  
 Ful sooth<sup>o</sup> is this proverbe, it is no lie;  
 Men saith right thus: "Alway the nye slye<sup>o</sup>  
 Maketh the ferre leve to be loth."<sup>9</sup> *sly one nearby*  
 For though that Absolon be wood<sup>o</sup> or wroth,<sup>o</sup> *crazy / angry*  
 By cause that he fer was from hir sighte,  
 This nye Nicholas stood in his lighte.<sup>o</sup> *in the way*  
 Now beer thee wel, thou hende Nicholas,  
 For Absolon may waile and singe allas.  
 And so bifel it on a Saterdag  
 This carpenter was goon til Oseney,  
 And hende Nicholas and Alisoun  
 Accorded been to this conclusioun,  
 That Nicholas shal shapen hem a wile<sup>o</sup> *devise them a trick*  
 This sely<sup>o</sup> jalous housbonde to bigile, *innocent*  
 And if so be this game wente aright,  
 She sholden sleepen in his arm al night—  
 For this was his desir and hire also.  
 And right anoon, withouten wordes mo,  
 This Nicholas no lenger wolde tarye,  
 But dooth ful softe unto his chambre carye

5. What more would you want?

6. He woos her with go-betweens and mediation.

7. In the English mystery plays, Herod was often por-

trayed as a bully.

8. Undertake a useless endeavor.

9. Makes the distant beloved seem hateful.



- Bothe mete and drinke for a day or twaye,  
 And to hir housbonde bad hire for to saye,  
 305 If that he axed after Nicholas,  
 She sholde saye she niste<sup>o</sup> wher he was— *did not know*  
 Of al that day she sawgh him nought with yē:  
 She trowed<sup>o</sup> that he was in maladye, *believed*  
 For for no cry hir maide coude him calle,  
 310 He nolde<sup>o</sup> answeere for no thing that mighte falle.<sup>o</sup> *would not / happen*  
 This passeth forth al thilke<sup>o</sup> Saterdag *that same*  
 That Nicholas stille in his chambre lay,  
 And eet, and sleep, or dide what him leste,<sup>o</sup> *he liked*  
 Til Sonday that the sonne gooth to reste.  
 315 This sely carpenter hath greet mervaile<sup>o</sup> *wonder*  
 Of Nicholas, or what thing mighte him aile,  
 And saide, "I am adrad,<sup>o</sup> by Saint Thomas,  
 It stondesth nat aright with Nicholas. *afraid*  
 God shilde<sup>o</sup> that he deide sodeinly!  
 320 This world is now ful tikel,<sup>o</sup> sikerly:<sup>o</sup> *forbid*  
 I sawgh today a corps yborn to chirche *changeable / surely*  
 That now a Monday last I sawgh him wirche.<sup>o</sup> *working*  
 Go up," quod he unto his knave<sup>o</sup> anoon, *manservant*  
 "Clepe<sup>o</sup> at his dore or knobbe with a stoon. *call*  
 325 Looke how it is and tel me boldely."  
 This knave gooth him up ful sturdily,  
 And at the chambre dore whil that he stood  
 He cride and knobbed as that he were wood,  
 "What? How? What do ye, maister Nicholay?  
 330 How may ye sleepen al the longe day?"  
 But al for nought: he herde nat a word.  
 An hole he foond ful lowe upon a boord,  
 Ther as the cat was wont in for to creepe,  
 And at that hole he looked in ful deepe,  
 335 And atte laste he hadde of him a sighte.  
 This Nicholas sat evere caping<sup>o</sup> uprighte *staring*  
 As he hadde kiked<sup>o</sup> on the newe moone. *gazed*  
 A down he gooth and tolde his maister soone  
 In what array<sup>o</sup> he saw this ilke<sup>o</sup> man. *condition / same*  
 340 This carpenter to blessen him<sup>1</sup> bigan.  
 And saide, "Help us, Sainte Frideswide!<sup>2</sup>  
 A man woot litel what him shal bitide.  
 This man is falle, with his astromye,  
 In som woodnesse<sup>o</sup> or in som agonye.<sup>o</sup> *madness / fit*  
 345 I thoughte ay<sup>o</sup> wel how that it sholde be: *always*  
 Men sholde nought knowe of Goddes privetee.  
 Ye, blessed be alway a lewed<sup>o</sup> man *unlearned*  
 That nought but only his bileve can.<sup>o</sup> *knows his creed*  
 So ferde<sup>o</sup> another clerk with astromye:  
 350 He walked in the feeldes for to pry<sup>o</sup> *fared*  
 Upon the sterres, what ther sholde bifalle, *gaze*

1. Bless himself (with the sign of the cross).

2. A saint venerated for her healing powers.

Til he was in a marle-pit<sup>o</sup> yfalle— clay-pit  
 He saw nat that. But yet, by Saint Thomas,  
 Me reweth sore<sup>o</sup> for hende Nicholas. feel sorry  
 He shal be rated<sup>o</sup> of his studying, scolded  
 355 If that I may, by Jesus, hevene king!  
 Get me a staf that I may underspore,<sup>o</sup> pry upward  
 Whil that thou, Robin, hevest up the dore.  
 He shal out of his studying, as I gesse.”  
 360 And to the chambre dore he gan him dresse.<sup>o</sup> placed himself  
 His knave was a strong carl<sup>o</sup> for the nones,<sup>o</sup> fellow / purpose  
 And by the haspe<sup>o</sup> he haaf<sup>o</sup> it up atones: hinge / heaved  
 Into the floor the dore fil anoon.  
 This Nicholas sat ay as stille as stoon,  
 365 And evere caped up into the air.  
 This carpenter wende<sup>o</sup> he were in despair, thought  
 And hente<sup>o</sup> him by the shuldres mightily, grabbed  
 And shook him harde, and cride spitously,<sup>o</sup> vigorously  
 “What, Nicholay, what, how! What! Looke adown!  
 370 Awaak and thenk on Cristes passioun!<sup>3</sup>  
 I crouche<sup>o</sup> thee from elves and fro wightes.”<sup>o</sup> bless / evil spirits  
 Therwith the nightspel<sup>o</sup> saide he anoonrightes charm  
 On foure halves<sup>o</sup> of the hous aboute, sides  
 And on the thressfold on the dore withoute:  
 375 “Jesu Crist and Sainte Benedight,<sup>4</sup>  
 Blesse this hous from every wikked wight!  
 For nightes nerye<sup>o</sup> the White Pater Noster.<sup>5</sup> protect  
 Where wentestou, thou Sainte Petres soster?”<sup>o</sup> sister  
 And at the laste this hende Nicholas  
 380 Gan for to sike<sup>o</sup> sore, and saide, “Allas,  
 Shal al the world be lost eftsoones<sup>o</sup> now?” sigh  
immediately  
 This carpenter answerde, “What saistou?  
 What, thenk on God as we doon, men that swinke.”<sup>o</sup> work  
 This Nicholas answerde, “Fecche me drinke,  
 385 And after wol I speke in privetee  
 Of certain thing that toucheth me and thee.  
 I wol telle it noon other man, certain.”  
 This carpenter gooth down and comth again,  
 And broughte of mighty ale a large quart,  
 390 And whan that eech of hem hadde dronke his part,  
 This Nicholas his dore faste shette,<sup>o</sup> shut  
 And down the carpenter by him he sette,  
 And saide, “John, myn hoste lief<sup>o</sup> and dere, beloved  
 Thou shalt upon thy trouthe<sup>o</sup> swere me here word of honor  
 395 That to no wight thou shalt this conseil<sup>o</sup> wraye;<sup>o</sup> advice / disclose  
 For it is Cristes conseil that I saye,  
 And if thou telle it man, thou art forlore,<sup>o</sup> lost  
 For this vengeance thou shalt have therefore,  
 That if thou wraye<sup>o</sup> me, thou shalt be wood.”<sup>o</sup> reveal / mad

3. Thinking about Christ's death and resurrection was supposed to ward off evil spells.

4. St. Benedict, founder of Western monasticism.

5. The Lord's Prayer, used as a charm.



400	<p>“Nay, Crist forbede it, for his holy blood,”          Quod tho this sely man. “I nam no labbe,<sup>o</sup>          And though I saye, I nam nat lief<sup>o</sup> to gabbe.          Say what thou wilt, I shal it nevere telle          To child ne wif, by him that harwed helle.”<sup>6</sup></p>	<p><i>am no blabbermouth</i>  <i>do not like</i></p>
405	<p>“Now John,” quod Nicholas, “I wol nought lie.          I have yfounde in myn astrologye,          As I have looked in the moone bright,          That now a Monday next, at quarter night,<sup>o</sup>          Shal falle a rain, and that so wilde and wood,<sup>o</sup>          That half so greet was nevere Noees<sup>o</sup> flood.          This world,” he saide, “in lasse than an hour          Shal al be dreint,<sup>o</sup> so hidous is the showr.          Thus shal mankinde drenche<sup>o</sup> and lese hir lif.”<sup>o</sup></p>	<p><i>near dawn</i>  <i>furious</i>  <i>Noah’s</i>  <i>drowned</i>  <i>drown / lose their lives</i></p>
415	<p>This carpenter answerde, “Allas, my wif!          And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!”          For sorwe of this he fil almost adown,          And saide, “Is there no remedye in this cas?”</p>	
420	<p>“Why yis, for Gode,” quod hende Nicholas,          “If thou wolt werken<sup>o</sup> after lore<sup>o</sup> and reed<sup>o</sup>—          Thou maist nought werken after thyn owene heed;          For thus saith Salomon that was ful trewe,          ‘Werk al by conseil and thou shalt nought rewe.’<sup>o</sup>          And if thou werken wolt by good conseil,          I undertake, withouten mast or sail,          Yet shal I save hire and thee and me.          Hastou nat herd how saved was Noee          Whan that Oure Lord hadde warned him biforn          That al the world with water sholde be lorn?”<sup>o</sup></p>	<p><i>act / learning / advice</i>  <i>regret</i></p>
425	<p>“Yis,” quod this carpenter, “ful yore<sup>o</sup> ago.”          “Hastou nat herd,” quod Nicholas, “also          The sorwe<sup>o</sup> of Noee with his felaweshipe?<sup>o</sup>          Er that he mighte gete his wif to shipe,          Him hadde levere,<sup>o</sup> I dar wel undertake,          At thilke<sup>o</sup> time than alle his wetheres blake<sup>o</sup>          That she hadde had a ship herself allone.<sup>7</sup>          And therefore woostou<sup>o</sup> what is best to doone?          This axeth haste, and of an hastif<sup>o</sup> thing          Men may nought preche or maken taryng.          Anoon go gete us faste into this in<sup>o</sup>          A kneeding trough or elles a kimelin<sup>o</sup>          For eech of us, but looke that they be large,          In whiche we mowen swimme as in a barge,          And han therinne vitaile suffisaunt<sup>o</sup>          But for a day—fy on the remenaunt!          The water shal aslake<sup>o</sup> and goon away          Aboute prime<sup>o</sup> upon the nexte day.          But Robin may nat wite<sup>o</sup> of this, thy knave,</p>	<p><i>lost</i>  <i>long</i>  <i>sorrow / companions</i>  <i>would have preferred</i>  <i>that / black rams</i>  <i>do you know</i>  <i>urgent</i>  <i>inn</i>  <i>brewing trough</i>  <i>enough food</i>  <i>recede</i>  <i>6 A.M.</i>  <i>know</i></p>

6. Christ, who harrowed hell upon his resurrection, releasing captive souls.

7. Noah’s wife was traditionally portrayed in the mystery plays as a complaining wife who resisted boarding the ark.



Ne eek thy maide Gille I may nat save.  
 Axe nought why, for though thou axe me,  
 I wol nought tellen Goddes privetee.  
 450 Suffiseth thee, but if thy wittes madde,<sup>o</sup> go mad  
 To han<sup>o</sup> as greet a grace as Noee hadde. have  
 Thy wif shal I wel saven, out of doute.  
 Go now thy way, and speed thee heraboute.  
 But whan thou hast for hire and thee and me  
 455 Ygeten<sup>o</sup> us thise kneeding-tubbes three, gotten  
 Thanne shaltou hangen hem in the roof ful hye,  
 That no man of oure purveyance<sup>o</sup> espye. preparations  
 And whan thou thus hast doon as I have said,  
 And hast oure vitaile faire in hem ylaid,  
 460 And eek<sup>o</sup> an ax to smite<sup>o</sup> the corde atwo, also / cut  
 Whan that the water comth that we may go,  
 And broke an hole an heigh<sup>o</sup> upon the gable on high  
 Unto the gardinward,<sup>o</sup> over the stable, toward the garden  
 That we may freely passen forth oure way,  
 465 Whan that the grete showr is goon away,  
 Thanne shaltou swimme as merye, I undertake,  
 As dooth the white doke<sup>o</sup> after hir drake. female duck  
 Thanne wol I clepe,<sup>o</sup> 'How, Alison? How, John? call out  
 Be merye, for the flood wol passe anoon.'  
 470 And thou wolt sayn, 'Hail, maister Nicholay!  
 Good morwe, I see thee wel, for it is day!'  
 And thanne shal we be lordes al oure lif  
 Of al the world, as Noee and his wif.  
 475 But of oo thing I warne thee ful right:  
 Be wel avised on that ilke night  
 That we been entred into shippes boord  
 That noon of us ne speke nought a word,  
 Ne clepe,<sup>o</sup> ne crye, but been in his prayere,  
 480 For it is Goddes owene heeste<sup>o</sup> dete. call out  
 Thy wif and thou mote<sup>o</sup> hange fer atwinne,<sup>o</sup> commandment  
 For that bitwixe you shal be no sinne— must / apart  
 Namore in looking than ther shal in deede.  
 This ordinance is said: go, God thee speede.  
 485 Tomorwe at night whan men been alle asleepe,  
 Into oure kneeding-tubbes wol we creepe,  
 And sitten there, abiding Goddes grace.  
 Go now thy way, I have no lenger space<sup>o</sup> time  
 To make of this no lenger sermoning.  
 490 Men sayn thus: 'Send the wise and say no thing.'  
 Thou art so wis it needeth thee nat teche:  
 Go save oure lif, and that I thee biseeche."  
 This sely<sup>o</sup> carpenter gooth forth his way: single  
 Ful ofte he saide allas and wailaway,  
 495 And to his wif he tolde his privetee,  
 And she was war,<sup>o</sup> and knew it bet<sup>o</sup> than he, aware / better  
 What al this quainte cast<sup>o</sup> was for to saye.<sup>o</sup> clever trick / mean  
 But nathelees she ferde<sup>o</sup> as she wolde deye, acted

- And saide, "Allas, go forth thy way anon.  
 500 Help us to scape,<sup>o</sup> or we been dede eechoon. escape  
 I am thy trewe verray wedded wif:  
 Go, dere spouse, and help to save oure lif."  
 Lo, which a greet thing is affeccioun!<sup>o</sup> emotion  
 Men may dien,<sup>o</sup> of imaginacioun,<sup>o</sup> die / fantasy  
 505 So deepe may impression be take.  
 This sely carpenter biginneth quake;  
 Him thinketh verrailiche<sup>o</sup> that he may see truly  
 Noees flood come walwing<sup>o</sup> as the see rolling in  
 To drenchen Alison, his hony dere.  
 510 He weepeth, wai leth, maketh sory cheere;<sup>o</sup> expression  
 He siketh<sup>o</sup> with ful many a sory swough,<sup>o</sup> sighs / breath  
 And gooth and geteth him a kneeding-trough,  
 And after a tubbe and a kimelin,  
 And prively he sente hem to his in,  
 515 And heeng hem in the roof in privetee;  
 His owene hand he made laddres three,  
 To climben by the ronges and the stalkes<sup>o</sup> uprights  
 Unto the tubbes hanging in the balkes,<sup>o</sup> rafters  
 And hem vitailed, bothe trough and tubbe,  
 520 With breed and cheese and good ale in a jubbe,<sup>o</sup> jug  
 Suffising right ynough as for a day.  
 But er that he hadde maad al this array,  
 He sente his knave, and eek his wenche also,  
 Upon his neede<sup>o</sup> to London for to go. errand  
 525 And on the Monday whan it drow to nighte,  
 He shette his dore withouten candel-lighte,  
 And dressed<sup>o</sup> alle thing as it sholde be, arranged  
 And shortly up they clomben alle three.  
 They seten stille wel a furlong way.<sup>8</sup>
- 530 "Now, Pater Noster, clum,"<sup>9</sup> saide Nicholay,  
 And "Clum" quod John, and "Clum" saide Alisoun.  
 This carpenter saide his devocioun,  
 And stille he sit and biddeth his prayere,  
 Awaiting on the rain, if he it heere.
- 535 The dede sleep, for wery bisnesse,  
 Fil on this carpenter right as I gesse  
 Aboute corfew time,<sup>o</sup> or litel more. dusk  
 For travailing of his gost<sup>o</sup> he groneth sore, spirit  
 And eft he routeth,<sup>o</sup> for his heed mislay. snores
- 540 Down of the laddre stalketh Nicholay,  
 And Alison ful softe adown she spedde:  
 Withouten wordes mo they goon to bedde  
 Ther as the carpenter is wont to lie.  
 Ther was the revel and the melodye,  
 545 And thus lith Alison and Nicholas  
 In bisnesse of mirthe and of solas,

8. The length of time to travel a furlong.

9. Say the Lord's Prayer and hush.



Til that the belle of Laudes<sup>1</sup> gan to ringe,  
 And freres<sup>o</sup> in the chauncel<sup>o</sup> gonne singe. *friars / chapel*  
 This parissch clerk, this amorous Absolon,  
 That is for love alway so wo-bigoon,  
 550 Upon the Monday was at Oseneye,  
 With compaignye him to disporte and playe,  
 And axed upon caas<sup>o</sup> a cloisterer<sup>2</sup> *by chance*  
 Ful prively after John the carpenter;  
 And he drow him apart out of the chirche,  
 555 And saide, "I noot:<sup>o</sup> I sawgh him here nought wirche<sup>o</sup> *don't know / working*  
 Sith Saterdag. I trowe that he be went  
 For timber ther oure abbot hath him sent.  
 For he is wont for timber for to go,  
 And dwellen atte grange<sup>o</sup> a day or two. *outlying farm*  
 560 Or elles he is at his hous, certain.  
 Where that he be I can nought soothly<sup>o</sup> sayn."  
 This Absolon ful jolif was and light,<sup>o</sup> *truly*  
 And thoughte, "Now is time to wake al night, *amorous and happy*  
 For sikerly,<sup>o</sup> I sawgh him nought stiringe *surely*  
 565 Aboute his dore sin<sup>o</sup> day bigan to springe.<sup>o</sup> *since / break*  
 So mote I thrive,<sup>o</sup> I shal at cokkes crowe *may I prosper*  
 Ful prively knocken at his windowe  
 That stant ful lowe upon his bowres<sup>o</sup> wal. *bedroom's*  
 570 To Alison now wol I tellen al  
 My love-longing, for yet I shal nat misse  
 That at the leeste way I shal hire kisse.  
 Som manere confort shal I have, parfay.<sup>o</sup> *indeed*  
 My mouth hath icched<sup>o</sup> al this longe day: *itched*  
 575 That is a signe of kissing at the leeste.  
 Al night me mette<sup>o</sup> eek I was at a feeste. *dreamed*  
 Therefore I wol go sleepe an hour or twaye,  
 And al the night thanne wol I wake and playe."  
 Whan that the firste cok hath crowe, anoon  
 580 Up rist this joly love-re Absolon,  
 And him arrayeth gay at point devis.<sup>o</sup> *fastidiously*  
 But first he cheweth grain<sup>3</sup> and licoris,  
 To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd his heer.  
 Under his tonge a trewe-love<sup>4</sup> he beer.  
 585 For therby wende<sup>o</sup> he to be gracious.<sup>o</sup> *supposed / attractive*  
 He rometh to the carpenteres hous,  
 And stille he stant under the shot-windowe—  
 Unto his brest it raughte,<sup>o</sup> it was so lowe— *reached*  
 And ofte he cougheth with a semisoun.<sup>o</sup> *soft noise*  
 590 "What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
 My faire brid,<sup>o</sup> my sweete cinamome?  
 Awaketh, lemman<sup>o</sup> myn, and speketh to me.  
 Wel litel thinken ye upon my wo  
 That for your love I swete<sup>o</sup> ther I go. *dissolve*

1. Lauds, daily church service before sunrise.  
 2. Member of the monastery.

3. Grain of paradise, an aromatic spice.  
 4. Four-leafed herb in the shape of a love knot.



- 595 No wonder is though that I swelte<sup>o</sup> and swete: swelter  
 I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.  
 Ywis,<sup>o</sup> lemman, I have swich love-longinge, certainly  
 That lik a turtle<sup>o</sup> trewe is my moorninge: turtle-dove  
 I may nat ete namore than a maide.”
- 600 “Go fro the windowe, Jakke fool,” she saide.  
 “As help me God, it wol nat be com-pa-me.<sup>o</sup> come kiss me  
 I love another, and elles I were to blame,  
 Wel bet than thee, by Jesu, Absolon.  
 Go forth thy way or I wol caste a stoon,  
 605 And lat me sleepe, a twenty devele way.”<sup>5</sup>  
 “Allas,” quod Absolon, “and wailaway,  
 That trewe love was evere so yvele biset.<sup>o</sup> badly done to  
 Thanne kis me, sin that it may be no bet,  
 For Jesus love and for the love of me.”
- 610 “Woltou thanne go thy way therwith?” quod she.  
 “Ye, certes, lemman,” quod this Absolon.  
 “Thanne maak thee reddy,” quod she. “I come anoon.”  
 And unto Nicholas she said stille,  
 “Now hust,<sup>o</sup> and thou shalt laughen al thy fille.” hush
- 615 This Absolon down sette him on his knees,  
 And saide, “I am a lord at alle degrees,<sup>o</sup> in every way  
 For after this I hope ther cometh more.  
 Lemman, thy grace, and sweete brid, thyn ore!”<sup>o</sup> mercy
- The windowe she undooth, and that in haste.  
 620 “Have do,” quod she, “com of and speed thee faste,  
 Lest that oure neighebores thee espye.”  
 This Absolon gan wipe his mouth ful drye:  
 Derk was the night as pich or as the cole,  
 And at the windowe out she putte hir hole.
- 625 And Absolon, him fil no bet ne wers,  
 But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers,  
 Ful savourly,<sup>o</sup> er he were war of this. enthusiastically  
 Abak he sterte, and thoughte it was amis,  
 For wel he wiste a womman hath no beard.  
 630 He felte a thing al rough and longe yherd,<sup>o</sup> haird  
 And saide, “Fy, allas, what have I do?”  
 “Teehee,” quod she, and clapte the windowe to.  
 And Absolon gooth forth a sory pas.<sup>o</sup> with downcast step  
 “A beard, a beard!” quod hende Nicholas,  
 635 “By Goddes corpus,<sup>o</sup> this gooth faire and weel.” body
- This sely Absolon herde everydeel,  
 And on his lippe he gan for anger bite,  
 And to himself he saide, “I shal thee quite.”<sup>o</sup> repay
- 640 Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes  
 With dust, with sond, with straw, with cloth, with chippes,  
 But Absolon, that saith ful ofte allas?  
 “My soule bitake<sup>o</sup> I unto Satanas,  
 But me were levere than<sup>6</sup> all this town,” quod he, hand over

5. In the name of 20 devils.

6. I would rather than (have).

- 645 "Of this despit<sup>o</sup> awroken<sup>o</sup> for to be.  
 Allas," quod he, "allas I ne hadde ybleint!"<sup>o</sup>  
 His hote love was cold and al yqueint,<sup>o</sup>  
 For fro that time that he hadde kist hir ers  
 Of paramours he sette nought a kers,<sup>7</sup>  
 For he was heled of his maladye.  
 650 Ful ofte paramours he gan defye,<sup>o</sup>  
 And weep as dooth a child that is ybete.<sup>o</sup>  
 A softe paas he wente over the streete  
 Until a smith men clepen daun<sup>o</sup> Gervais,  
 That in his forge smithed plough harneis:<sup>o</sup>  
 655 He sharpeth shaar<sup>o</sup> and cultour<sup>o</sup> bisily.  
 This Absolon knokketh al esily,<sup>o</sup>  
 And saide, "Undo,<sup>o</sup> Gervais, and that anoon."  
 "What, who artou?" "It am I, Absolon."  
 "What, Absolon? What, Cristes sweete tree!  
 660 Why rise ye so rathe?<sup>o</sup> Ey, benedicite,<sup>o</sup>  
 What aileth you? Som gay girl, God it woot,  
 Hath brought you thus upon the viritoot.<sup>o</sup>  
 By Sainte Note,<sup>8</sup> ye woot wel what I mene."  
 This Absolon ne roughte nat a bene<sup>o</sup>  
 665 Of al his play. No word again he yaf:<sup>o</sup>  
 He hadde more tow on his distaf<sup>9</sup>  
 Than Gervais knew, and saide, "Freend so dere,  
 This hote cultour in the chimenee<sup>o</sup> here,  
 As lene it me:<sup>1</sup> I have therwith to doone.  
 670 I wol bringe it thee again ful soone."  
 Gervais answerde, "Certes, were it gold,  
 Or in a poke nobles alle untold,<sup>2</sup>  
 Thou sholdest have, as I am trewe smith.  
 Ey, Cristes fo,<sup>3</sup> what wol ye do therwith?"  
 675 "Therof," quod Absolon, "be as be may.  
 I shal wel telle it thee another day,"  
 And caughte the cultour by the colde stele.<sup>o</sup>  
 Ful softe out at the dore he gan to stele,  
 And wente unto the carpenteres wal:  
 680 He cougheth first and knokketh therwithal  
 Upon the windowe, right as he dide er.<sup>o</sup>  
 This Alison answerde, "Who is ther  
 That knokketh so? I warante<sup>o</sup> it a thief."  
 "Why, nay," quod he, "God woot, my sweete lief,<sup>o</sup>  
 685 I am thyn Absolon, my dereling.  
 Of gold," quod he, "I have thee brought a ring—  
 My moder yaf it me, so God me save;  
 Ful fin it is and therto wel ygrave:<sup>o</sup>  
 690 This wol I yiven thee if thou me kisse."  
 This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,

insult / avenged  
turned aside  
quenched

renounce  
beaten

cull Sir  
equipment  
plowshare / plough-blade  
softly  
open up

early / bless me

on the proud

did not care a bean  
gave

fireplace

handle

before

bet  
dear

engraved

7. Did not value as much as a piece of cress.

8. St. Noet, a ninth-century saint, with possible pun on Noah.

9. Flax on his distaff (i.e., cares on his mind).

1. Be so good as to lend it to me.

2. Or in a pouch of uncounted gold coins.

3. By Christ's foe (i.e., the Devil).

And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape:<sup>4</sup>  
 He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.  
 And up the windowe dide he hastily,  
 And out his ers he putteth prively,  
 695 Over the buttoke to the haunche-boon.<sup>o</sup> thigh  
     And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,  
 "Speek, sweete brid, I noot nought wher thou art."  
 This Nicholas anon leet flee<sup>o</sup> a fart let fly  
 As greet as it hadde been a thonder-dent<sup>o</sup> thunderbolt  
 700 That with the strook he was almost yblent,<sup>o</sup> blinded  
 And he was redy with his iren hoot,  
 And Nicholas amiddle the ers he smoot:  
 Of gooth the skin an hande-brede<sup>o</sup> aboute; hand's width  
 The hote cultour brende so his toute<sup>o</sup> backside  
 705 That for the smert<sup>o</sup> he wende<sup>o</sup> for to die; pain / thought  
 As he were wood for wo he gan to crye,  
 "Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!"  
     This carpenter out of his slomber sterte,  
 And herde oon cryen "Water!" as he were wood,  
 710 And thoughte, "Allas, now cometh Noweles<sup>o</sup> flood!" Noah's  
 He sette him up withoute wordes mo,  
 And with his ax he smooth the corde atwo,  
 And down gooth al: he foond neither to selle  
 Ne breed ne ale til he cam to the celle,<sup>5</sup>  
 715 Upon the floor, and ther aswoune<sup>o</sup> he lay. stunned  
     Up sterte<sup>o</sup> hire Alison and Nicholay, leaped  
 And criden "Out" and "Harrow" in the streete.  
 The neighebores, bothe smale and grete,<sup>6</sup>  
 In ronnen for to gauren<sup>o</sup> on this man stare  
 720 That aswoune lay bothe pale and wan,  
 For with the fal he brosten<sup>o</sup> hadde his arm; broken  
 But stonde he moste unto his owene harm,  
 For whan he spak he was anon bore down<sup>o</sup> restrained  
 With<sup>o</sup> hende Nicholas and Alisoun: by  
 725 They tolden every man that he was wood<sup>o</sup>— crazy  
 He was agast<sup>o</sup> so of Noweles flood, afraid  
 Thurgh fantasye, that of his vanitee<sup>o</sup> folly  
 He hadde ybought him kneeding-tubbes three,  
 And hadde hem hanged in the roof above,  
 730 And that he prayed hem, for Goddes love,  
 To sitten in the roof, *par compaignye*.<sup>o</sup> for fellowship  
     The folk gan laughen at his fantasye.  
 Into the roof they kiken<sup>o</sup> and they cape,<sup>o</sup> peer / gape  
 And turned al his harm unto a jape,  
 735 For what so that this carpenter answerde,  
 It was for nought: no man his reson herde;  
 With othes grete he was so sworn adown,<sup>o</sup> refuted by oaths  
 That he was holden wood in al the town,

4. Make the joke even better.

5. He found no time to sell either bread or ale until he reached the floor (i.e., he fell to the ground too quickly to

be aware of what was happening).

6. Lower- and upper-class people alike.



For every clerk anoonright heeld with other:  
 740 They saide, "The man was wood, my leve brother,"  
 And every wight<sup>o</sup> gan laughen at this strif. person  
 Thus swived<sup>o</sup> was the carpenteres wif screwed  
 For al his keeping and his jalousye,  
 And Absolon hath kist hir nether<sup>o</sup> yë, lower  
 745 And Nicholas is scalded in the toute:  
 This tale is doon, and God save al the route!

**THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE** Dame Alison, the Wife of Bath, is Chaucer's greatest contribution to the stock characters of Western culture. She has a long literary ancestry, most immediately in the Duenna of the thirteenth-century French poem, *The Romance of the Rose*, and stretching back to the Roman poet Ovid. Dame Alison stands out in bold relief, even among the vivid Canterbury pilgrims, partly because Chaucer gives her so rebellious and explicitly self-created a biography. She has out-lived five husbands, accumulated wealth from the first three, and made herself rich in the growing textile industry of her time. At once a great companion and greatly unnerving, Alison lives in constant battle with a secular and religious world mostly controlled by men and yet has a keen appetite both for the men and for the battle.

The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* seem only the current installments of a multifaceted struggle in which Dame Alison has long been engaged, at first through her body and social role and now, in the face of advancing years, through the remaining agency of retrospective storytelling. She battles a society in which many young women are almost chattels in a marital market, as was the twelve-year-old version of herself who first was married off to a wealthier, much older man. She battles him and later husbands for power within the marriage, and her ambition to social dominance, as the *General Prologue* reports, extends to life in her urban parish.

By the moment of the Canterbury pilgrimage, though, the Wife's adversaries are more daunting, less easily conquered. The *Wife's Prologue*, for all its autobiographical energy, is primarily a debate with the clergy and with "auctoritee"—the whole armature of learning and literacy by which the clergy (like her clerically educated fifth husband, Jankyn) seeks to silence her.

*The Wife's Tale*, too, can be seen as an angry riposte to the secular fantasies of Arthurian chivalry and genetic nobility. The Wife's well-born Arthurian knight is a common rapist, who finds himself at the mercy of a queen and then in the arms of a crone. The tale turns Arthurian conventions on their head, lays sexual violence in the open, and puts legal and magical power in the hands of women. It is explicitly a fantasy, but a powerful one.

Alison's final enemy, mortality itself, is what makes her both most desperate and most sympathetic. The husbands are gone. Even the fondly recalled Jankyn slips into a rosy glow and the past tense; so does her own best friend and "gossip," the odd mirror-double "Alisoun." The Wife of Bath keeps addressing other "wives" in her *Prologue*, but there are no others on the pilgrimage. Her very argument with the institutionalized church distances her from its comforts, and she is deeply aware that time is stealing her beauty as it has taken away the companions who made up her earlier life. If Alison's *Tale* closes with a delicious fantasy of restored youth, it is only a pendant to the much longer *Prologue* and its cheerful yet poignant acceptance of age.

### The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Experience, though noon auctoritee<sup>1</sup>  
 Were in this world, is right ynough for me  
 To speke of wo that is in mariage:  
 For lordinges, ° sith I twelf yeer was of age— gentlemen

1. Even if no authority, textual precedent.