'I don’t care what anyone says. Experience of the world is the best thing. It may not be the main authority but, in relationships, it is a good teacher. I know all about unhappiness in marriage. Goodness me. Oh yes. I was twelve years old when I first got a husband. I’ve had five altogether, thanks be to God. Five of them trooping up to the church door. That is a lot of men. By and large they were gentlemen, or so I was led to believe. Yet I was told quite recently — I forget by whom — that our Saviour attended only one wedding. It was in the town of Cana. So, the argument goes, I should only ever have been married once. And then there was the time when Jesus rebuked the Samaritan woman. They were standing beside a well, weren’t they? “You have had five husbands,” He said. “And the man you are living with is not your husband.” He was God and man, so I suppose He knew what He was talking about. I don’t understand what His point was, but I am sure He had one. Why was the fifth man not her husband? It doesn’t make any sense. How many husbands had she actually had? How many husbands was she allowed? In all my life I never heard there was a limit. Have you?

‘There will be ever so many experts telling us one thing and another. But I know this much. God told us to go forth and multiply. Am I right? I can understand that part of the Bible, at any rate. And wasn’t it God who commanded my husband to “leave father and mother” and belong to me alone? But He never mentioned a number. It could be two. It
could be eight. Who knows? There's nothing wrong with it anyway.

'What about that Solomon? He was a clever man. Didn't he have more than one wife? I wish to God I had his luck. If I had half as many husbands as he had wives, I would be laughing. Think of it. I could be God's gift to men. And what about all those wedding nights? I bet that he did you-know-what as hard as a hammer with a nail. I bet he gave them a right pounding.

'Well, thank God, I have had five at least. Roll on number six. I don't care where or when, as long as he comes. I am not going to sew myself up. When my present husband goes the way of all flesh, I shall be looking for another. You can bet on it. What is the name of that apostle who said that was the best thing to do? "Better to marry than to burn." That's what he said. And he can say it again. I don't give a damn what people think. The father of Noah had two wives, didn't he? I saw them in the pageant play. It made no difference to him. And what about Abraham? What about Jacob? They were old holies, weren't they? And they had more than two wives. Plenty of these prophets did. Show me the passage where God forbids more than one marriage? Go on. Show me. You can't. Where is the part of the Bible that commands virginity? There isn't one. The apostle Paul says that he had no firm opinion on the matter. He may advise a woman to keep her virginity. That's fair enough. But he cannot order her. He leaves it up to her. If God Himself had wanted us all to be virgins He would not have invented marriage, would he? If we were never allowed to mate, then where would the next generation of virgins come from? Not even Paul dared to touch a subject that his master left alone. If there's a prize for virginity, I'm not going to compete for it. That's for sure. And I bet there won't be many runners.

'Not everyone will agree with me, of course. There are some people who stay virgins because they believe that they are performing God's will. Paul himself was a virgin, wasn't he? He may have wished that everyone else would follow his example,
There's nothing wrong with it,

He was a clever man. Didn't he sh to God I had his luck. If I had had wives, I would be laughing, gift to men. And what about all of he did you-know-what as hard he gave them a right pounding.

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but he was just stating an opinion. He did not forbid me from marrying. How could he? So it is no sin to marry me, once the old man is dead. It will not count as bigamy. Of course it is always dangerous for a man to touch a woman, in bed at least. It is like putting a flame to dry wood. You know what I mean. But that is as far as I will go. Paul said only that he preferred the virgin to the married couple. The virgin is stronger.

'I grant you that. I have no quarrel with virgins. If they want to remain pure, in body and soul, I will not stop them. I can't criticize and, in any case, I make no great claims for myself. But let me put it this way. Not all the vessels in a house are necessarily made of gold. The wooden ones are good for certain purposes. A man can put his lips to wood as well as gold. Although it may not glitter, it serves its function. God calls men and women to different vocations. All of us have different talents – some can do this, others can do that. I can do that.

'I know that virginity is a form of perfection. Chastity is close to holiness. Christ Himself is perfection. But He did not tell people to surrender everything for the sake of the poor. He did not order them to give up their worldly goods and follow His footsteps. That was reserved for perfectionists, as I said. But, my lords, I am not one of those. I have a few years left in me yet, and I am going to devote them to the arts of married life. I will couple and thrive.

'And tell me this. Why does God give us those parts between our legs? Cunts are not made for nothing, are they? They are not unnecessary. Some will say that they have been created so that we can urinate. Others will say that they are just the marks to distinguish female from male. You know that isn't true. All experience tells us otherwise. I hope that none of you priests and nuns will be angry with me, but I must say this. We have been given our private parts for pleasure as well as necessity. We must procreate as well as pee, within the limits set by God. Why else is there the ruling that a wife must freely render her body to her husband? How is he going to receive it
without using his you-know-what? I'll say it once again. Our parts are there for two purposes, for purging piss and for propagation.

'Now I am not claiming that every man and woman is bound to propagate. That would be absurd. That would be to deny the virtue of chastity. Christ was a virgin. And He had a male body, did He not? Many saints have been virginal, too. I expect that they had private parts. I will say nothing against them. They are loaves of the purest white bread, and we wives are buns of coarse barley. And yet Mark tells us that Christ Himself fed the multitude with barley bread. I am not fussy. I will fulfil the role that God gave me. I will use my hole, my instrument, my cunt, with as good a grace as He bequeathed it to me. If I am grudging about it, God will never forgive me. My husband can have it morning and night, whenever it pleases him. He can pay his debt any time. I want him to be my debtor and my slave. I will be troubling his flesh, as they put it, while I am married to him. I am given power over his body for the rest of my life. Is that not so? That is what Paul says. Paul also orders husbands to love their wives. I quite agree.'

The Pardoner suddenly rose from his saddle and interrupted her. 'Now, dame,' he said. 'By God and the cross you have been a noble orator in your cause. I was just about to get married myself but, hearing you, I am having second thoughts. Why should I put my flesh to so much trouble, as you put it? I don't think I will be wed at all.'

'Just wait a minute,' she said. 'I haven't begun my story yet. You may not find it a wholesome draught. It will not be as sweet as ale. But drink it down. I will tell you a story about unhappiness in marriage. I am old enough to be experienced in the subject — well, I was the one who held the whip. I know all about it. Do you still want to sip out of my barrel? I have given you fair warning. I will give you ten different examples of marital disaster. There may be more than ten. I am not sure. There is an old saying, "Forewarned is forearmed." I think
I'll say it once again. Our every man and woman is absurd. That would be to was a virgin. And He had nts have been virginal, too. I will say nothing against white bread, and we wives Mark tells us that Christ rley bread. I am not fussy, me. I will use my hole, my a grace as He bequeathed it, God will never forgive ming and night, whenever any time. I want him to be troubling his flesh, as they 1. I am given power over that not so? That is what s to love their wives. I quite

his saddle and interrupted a the cross you have . I was just about to get m having second thoughts. uch trouble, as you put it?

I haven't begun my story draught. It will not be as will tell you a story about enough to be experienced who held the whip. I know out of my barrel? I have you ten different examples re than ten. I am not sure. ed is forearmed." I think those are the exact words of Ptolemy. Look it up. It's in one of his books.'

'Dame,' the Pardoner said to her, 'do begin. We are on tenterhooks until we hear you. Tell us the story, and spare no man in the process. Teach all the young men here your techniques.'

'Gladly,' she replied. 'If that is what you want. But yet I beg all of you to remember this. Don't get upset about anything I say. Don't take offence. I mean no harm. I just want to entertain you all.

'So now I will begin. I shall tell you the truth, so help me God. May I never taste wine or ale again if I deceive you. I have had, as I said, five husbands. Three of them were good and two of them were bad. The three good ones were rich, and they were old. They were so old that they could hardly fulfil their duties. They could hardly rise to the occasion. You know what I mean. God help me, I can't help laughing when I remember how hard they tried. God, did they sweat. I set no store by them in any case. Once they had given me their land and their fortune, I wasn't bothered about the rest. I did not have to flatter or beguile them.

'They loved me so much that I took their love for granted. That is the truth of it. A wise woman will be busy looking for a lover only when she hasn't got one. But since I had them in the palm of my hand - and got all their money, too - why should I go to the trouble of pleasing them further? I could please myself instead. So I set them to work. Many nights they were exhausted and miserable. Were they unhappy with me? Well, let me put it like this. We would not have won many prizes for domestic bliss. Yet I got my way. I kept them sweet enough. They were always bringing me gifts from the local fair. And they were always happy when I spoke nicely to them. God alone knows that there were many times when I scolded them. Oh, did I nag them! Now, all you wives, listen to me carefully. Always be mistress in your household. If you need to, accuse your husbands of things they haven't done. That is the way to
behave towards men. I tell you this much. Women are much better at lying and cheating than men. I am not telling this to experienced wives. They have no need of my advice. I am talking to those who are having trouble. A wise wife, if she knows what she is doing, can swear that fire is water. If a little bird whispers in her husband’s ear, about something or other, she will call the little bird a liar. She will even get her maid to swear to her virtue. That’s the way to do it.

‘So this is the kind of thing I said: “Now, you old dotard, what have you got to tell me? Why is our neighbour’s wife looking so pleased with herself? She is respected and flattered wherever she goes. And what about me? I am obliged to sit at home. I don’t have any clothes to wear. And why are you always next door? Is that woman so good-looking? Or are you just randy? Why are you always whispering with my maid? Good God, man! Button up your trousers, you old lecher. And what if I do have a man friend? What’s that to you? Why do you always complain if I just pop into his house for a minute or two? Then you come home rat-arsed, stinking of drink, and start lecturing me on my behaviour. What a load of nonsense. You go drivelling on about the curse of marriage. If you marry a poor woman, you say, then it costs a fortune. If you marry a rich woman, or a woman of high birth, you have to put up with her airs and graces. If she is good-looking, then you have to put up with her easy virtue. Oh yes, you say, any lecher can take her. Her virtue comes cheap. Everyone wants her, and everyone can have her. And all the while you are looking at me. How dare you?”

‘I pause for breath and start again. “Then you start talking about women. Some men want them for their looks, and some for their money. Some men are only interested in their figures. Others are pleased if their women can sing or dance, or talk well, or are sociable. Some like slender hands and arms. Some like long legs. Oh, you say, no man can keep guard over these castles. The enemy is sure to get over the wall and make it inside.”
THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE

"An ugly woman lusts for any man she sees. According to you. She will leap on anyone with her tongue hanging out, like a spaniel, until she finds one who is willing to do it. There never was a goose so grey that it did not find its gander. Any itch can be scratched. This is your so-called philosophy. This is what you dole out to me when you come to bed. You say that no man needs to get married. No man who wants to get to heaven should consider it. Well, old man, may thunder and lightning strike you down! May your ancient withered neck be broken!

"You tell me that there is an old proverb, ‘The sight of a leaking roof, the smell of smoke, and the sound of wives, are enough to make a man flee from his home.’ You silly old fool. What are you talking about? You say women will hide their vices until they are safely married. Only then will they show them. That is an idiot’s opinion. They say that a good Englishman takes stock of his oxen and his cattle, his horses and his hounds, before he buys them. He tries out his bowls and his washbasins, his stools and his spoons, to make sure that they are sound. He even checks his chamber pots. Why does he not take the same precaution with his wife? You old dotard! You fool! How dare you say that we show our vices only when we are married?

"And another thing. You say that I am only happy when you are praising my good looks. That I expect you to gaze lovingly upon me, and call me ‘my most lovely wife’ in public. I expect you to make my birthday a holy day, do I? And receive expensive presents? I never heard such nonsense in my life. You are supposed to receive my old nurse and my chambermaid in great state, and to entertain my father and all his relatives? Lies. All lies from the mouth of an old goat.

"Oh yes. Then you make a fuss about our apprentice, Johnny. Just because he has lovely blond hair – it shines like gold, it really does – and just because he accompanies me on my shopping expeditions, you become suspicious. Johnny means nothing to me. If you died tomorrow, I would not give..."
him a second look. And tell me this. Why do you hide the keys
to your chest? It is as much mine as yours. Do you think you
are going to make a fool out of me? You are not going to get
my body and my goods. You must be mad even to consider it.
You can have one or the other. But not both. Think about it,
old man. What is the point of spying on me, and questioning
the servants? If you had your way, I would be locked up in that
damned chest as well. What you should be saying is this. ‘Oh
dear wife, please go wherever you like. Feel free. I won’t listen
to any rumours about you. I know you, Dame Alice, to be a
true and faithful wife.’ That is what you should say. We wives
never like husbands who pry or who try to control us. We must
be at liberty. That’s the truth of it.

“The best of all you men was that wise astrologer, Ptolemy.
He was from Egypt, wasn’t he? He wrote down a proverb in
one of his books that sums it all up. ‘The wisest man,’ he said,
‘is the one who minds his own business and does not worry
about the conduct of the world.’ You understand what he
meant by that, I suppose? If you have enough, or more than
enough, why should you bother about the pleasures of other
people? Let me tell you this, you old goat. You will get cunt
enough at night. Only a miser would stop a man lighting a
candle with the flame from his lantern. Do you understand
me? You will still be able to see in the dark. Don’t worry. No
one has stolen your flame.

“I’m sick to death of hearing you say that we women
should ‘dress demurely and discreetly’ just as if we were still
virgins. You love to quote from the Bible, don’t you? What is
that text? ‘No woman should be apparelled in precious stones
or walk abroad with braided hair. No woman should dress
herself in pearls or gold or fine fabrics.’ What a load of non-
sense. I can’t even be bothered to argue with you about it.

“What is that? I am like a cat, am I? You only have to singe
my skin, and I will never roam from home? Is that what you
think? But if the skin of a cat is sleek and shiny, then she will
not stay in the house for half an hour. She will be on the tiles
... Why do you hide the keys as yours. Do you think you are not going to get be mad even to consider it. But not both. Think about it, crying on me, and questioning, I would be locked up in that should be saying is this. 'Oh I like. Feel free. I won't listen on you, Dame Alice, to be a rat you should say. We wives ho try to control us. We must hat wise astrologer, Prolemy. He wrote down a proverb in p. 'The wisest man,' he said, 'business and does not worry.' You understand what he have enough, or more than about the pleasures of other old goat. You will get cunt could stop a man lighting a lamb. Do you understand in the dark. Don't worry. No you say that we women easily just as if we were still the Bible, don't you? What is appareled in precious stones are. No woman should dress fabrics. What a load of nonsense I argue with you about it.

am I? You only have to singe a beam home? Is that what you ask and shiny, then she will wear. She will be on the tiles before daybreak, showing herself off and setting up such a caterwaul that every cat in the neighbourhood will know she's on heat. Do you get my drift? If I am in the mood, I will stray.

'What good is it spying on me, you old fool? Argus was supposed to have a hundred eyes, but even he would not be able to stop me. Not unless I wanted him to lay his hands on me. Even so, I would still be able to fool him. You can count on it. You say that there are three types that torment the whole earth. They are — an upstart servant, a well-fed fool and a maid who is heir to her mistress. You tell me that the world cannot bear a fourth, namely a wife who is a shrew. You hateful old man. May God send you an early death. Why should you pick on wives, shrewish or not? Surely there are other candidates for that honour? Leave off your preaching.

'And then you say that a woman's love is nothing but hell on earth, a piece of barren land without water. You compare it to wild fire; it burns out of control; the more it consumes in flame, the more it wishes to destroy. Then you change your metaphor. You compare the poor wife to a worm eating its way up a tree; she gets hold of her husband's vital parts, and eventually pulls him down. All husbands are supposed to know this, are they? Old dotard. Goat. Wait till I get my hands on you.'

'And that, in a nutshell, is the way I talked to my five husbands. I really flattened them. I swore that they were drunk when they accused me of anything. I got dear Johnny and my maid to back me up. Oh Lord, the amount of trouble I caused them! And, to tell you the truth, they were quite innocent. I was like a filly. I could bite and whinny. I would scold them when I was really in the wrong. Otherwise I would have got the worst of it. That could not be allowed. The first one who comes to the mill is the first one to get bread. I called foul first. So I won the battle. They were quite ready to beg forgiveness for sins they had never committed. I accused them of having affairs with women, when they were so ill that they could hardly stand.
Yet they put up with it. They really believed that I complained so much because, deep down, I loved them. Oh, I used to say, I go out at night because I want to check up on all the women you are screwing. With that excuse, I had quite a lot of fun myself. Women are born with these skills, you see. God gave us the gift of weeping and trimming and deceiving. I have been doing it all my life and, if I am allowed to boast, I must say that I managed to get the better of all of my husbands. Whether it was by trick or force, by nagging or complaining, I had the mastery. They got the worst of it in bed, of course. That’s where I really gave them hell. If I felt their hands reaching out for me, I threatened to make a quick exit – unless, that is, they paid me some form of ransom. Once they had paid up, I let them do whatever they liked. I wasn’t particular.

So I tell you all this. You must pay for what you want. Everything in this world is for sale. An empty hand lures no hawk. You know that expression, I suppose. I would satisfy all their lusts, once my purse was full. Sometimes I even pretended to enjoy it. In fact I never really enjoyed the taste of tough old meat. That was probably the reason I gave them such a hard time. The pope himself could have been sitting right beside them, at table, and I would still have nagged them. I gave as good as I got. If I were making my last will and testament, I would still owe them nothing. I paid them word for word, so help me God. I was so smart and tricky that they gave up the fight. It was the best thing they could have done, believe me. Otherwise they would have had no rest. One or two of them may have looked at me like tigers, but they would never have got me in their jaws.

This is what I said to one of them. “Oh look, sweetheart, at Willy.” Willy was the name of our sheep. “Look at him. Look how meek and lovely he is. Come over to me now, dear, and let me give you a little kiss on your cheek. You should be like Willy. You should be patient and humble. You are always telling me about the patience of Job. Why not follow suit? You should practise what you preach. Is that not so? Otherwise I
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Why not follow suit? You
is that not so? Otherwise I
will have to teach you a harder lesson – that it is a good thing
to keep a wife peaceful. One of us must give in. That’s for sure.
And it’s not going to be me. A man is more reasonable than a
woman, in any case, and must surely be able to bear more
hardship. Why are you always moaning and complaining? Do
you want to reserve my pussy for yourself? You can have it.
Take it all. Go on. Take it. I know how much you love it. If I
were able to sell it, I would be walking around in luxury. I can
tell you that. But, no, I will keep it for you alone to graze on.
But, by God, you do me wrong!” Those were my exact words
to him.

‘Let me tell you about my fourth husband. He was an old
dog. He had a mistress, anyway. I was still young and full of
life. I was a bit wanton, I admit, but I was strong and stubborn
with it. I was as pert as a magpie. If anyone played the harp,
I was up on my feet dancing. When I had drunk a glass of
sweet white wine, I could sing like a nightingale in spring. Do
you know the story of Metellius, who beat his wife to death
because she liked her liquor? He would not have stopped
me, even if I had been his wife. No one can keep me away from
it. Once I have had a few, of course, I start thinking about
you-know-what. Love is on my mind. Just as surely as cold
weather makes hail or snow, so a greedy mouth makes for
a greedy tail. A drunken woman is not going to be able to
protect her virtue, is she? Every lecher knows that.

‘Jesus, when I think about my youth, I can’t help but laugh.
All that fun. All that sex. The memories cheer me even now. I
was on top of the world in those days. I was hot. Of course age
poisons everything. It has taken my beauty. It has robbed me
of strength. Well, let them go. Farewell to both of them. Let
the devil take them. Now that the flour has gone, I have got to
sell the bran. That’s the sum of it. But I’m trying to keep up my
spirits. Can’t you tell?

‘What was I saying about my fourth husband? Oh yes. I was
furious when I imagined him in the arms of another woman.
But I got my own back. My God. I made a cross for him out of
the same wood. That's all I can say. I did not prostitute myself. Certainly not. But I was so friendly to other men, so approachable, that I made him fry in his own fat. He simmered with anger and jealousy. I was his purgatory on earth. He suffered so much that his soul must have gone straight to heaven. When the shoe pinched, he cried out loudly enough. But no one, except God and my husband, knows how bitterly I tormented him. He died when I came back from my pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Now he lies buried before the main altar. I can't say that his tomb is as sumptuous as that of a king or emperor, but it will serve. It would have been a waste of money to build anything grand. Well goodbye, old man. May God give you rest in your coffin. Sweet dreams.

'Now I will tell you all about my fifth husband. I sincerely hope that he will not end in hell although, to tell you the truth, he was the worst behaved of all of them. God, he did beat me. I can still feel it in my ribs, and will do until my dying day. Ouch. Yet in bed he was so strong and supple that I have no complaints. He knew how to get the best out of me, especially when he grabbed hold of my fanny. I don't care how often he beat me. He knew how to kiss and make up. I loved him better than all the others. He played hard to get. He excited me. You know that we women have strange inclinations sometimes: we long most for the things we cannot have. It is perverse, isn't it? We will cry out and beg for the one thing forbidden to us. Deny us something, and we will desire it. Offer it to us, and we will run away. We spread out our wares and put on a show of indifference. You have seen it in the market. Nobody wants things that are sold too cheaply. A throng of buyers always puts up the price. Every woman knows this, if she knows anything.

'So I was talking about my fifth husband, Jankyn. God bless him. I took him for his looks and not for his money. He had been a student at Oxford but then he left university and took lodgings in the house of my old friend and townsman Alison. God bless her, too. We used to gossip all the time. So
THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

I can say, I did not prostitute myself, friendly to other men, so approached in own fat. He simmered with his purgatory on earth. He suffered have gone straight to heaven. When put out loudly enough. But no one, and, knows how bitterly I tormented came back from my pilgrimage to cried before the main altar. I can't say as that of a king or emperor, but we been a waste of money to build adobe, old man. May God give you dreams.

about my fifth husband. I sincerely in hell although, to tell you the truth, of all of them. God, he did beat me, bs, and will do until my dying day. so strong and supple that I have no to get the best out of me, especially my fanny. I don't care how often to kiss and make up. I loved him. He played hard to get. He excited with strange inclinations things we cannot have. It is out and beg for the one thing we desire. You spread out our wares that are sold too cheaply. A the price. Every woman

husband, Jankyn. God bless for his money. He had left university and took and townswoman kept up all the time. So

she knew all my little secrets and desires better than our parish priest. I would not have told them to him in any case. But I told her everything. If my husband had pissed against the wall, she would have known about it. If he had done some dirty deed, I would have informed her straight away. I also used to whisper in the ear of my niece and another lady-friend, but I swear to you that otherwise I was very discreet. There were times when Jankyn got very hot and bothered about all this; he went red and grew short of breath. But, as I said to him, he only had himself to blame. He should not entrust his secrets to me, should he? It stands to reason.

'So it happened that one day, in the season of Lent, I was on my way to have an intimate chat with Alison. I did this all the time - March, April, May, whatever - since there is nothing I like more than hearing all the news of the town. You should see me darting from house to house! Well, on this day, in the company of dear Alison and of her new lodger, I decided to walk into the fields. My husband was in London for the whole of Lent. Thank God for that. I was not constantly looking over my shoulder. I had the chance of eyeing up some hunk. And I would be pretty visible, too. How did I know where luck might lead me? I did not really care what places we went to, as long as there were plenty of people around. So I went to vigils and processions, to open-air preachings and to festivals. And of course I loved going on pilgrimages. You meet a better class of person, don't you think? Then I attended miracle plays and marriages. I always wore the same lovely red robes. There was no chance that the worms or moths would get at them, either. I put them on every day. They were gorgeous.

'Now I will tell you what happened next. I told you that the three of us were walking in the fields. I was having such a delicious conversation with Jankyn that, before I knew what I was saying, I told him that if I were a widow-woman he could have me. He could marry me there and then. Well, I did know what I was saying in actual fact. I am not boasting, but I do have a little bit of foresight left in me. I am prudent in marital
matters, as in much else. If a mouse has only one hole, then it is asking for trouble; if that hole is blocked, then goodbye mouse. So I led him to believe that I had fallen madly in love with him (that's an old trick my mother taught me, by the way). I told him that I dreamed of him every night. I dreamed that he came into my bed and killed me, and that the sheets were drenched in blood. "But," I said to him, "this is a lucky dream. It is a good omen. Blood signifies gold, doesn't it?" Of course it was all a lie. I never dreamed of him at all. I always followed my mother's advice, though, in more ways than one. Now where was I? Oh yes!

Fortunately my fourth husband was soon in his coffin. I weptful buckets, as wives are supposed to do. Boo-hoo. I kept a sorrowful look upon my face and draped a black kerchief over my head. I followed the proper custom, in other words. But since I already had my eye on my next husband, you may believe that I mourned less in private. So my late husband was carried to the church, with all our neighbours following his bier. Jankyn was with them, too. What a great pair of legs he had! I had never seen a more handsome face in that churchyard. Even before I had entered the church, I had fallen for him. Do you blame me? He was only twenty years old. My age. No, I'm lying. I was forty by then, but I had the desires of a twenty-year-old. I had the hot blood of a colt. Venus was in my ascendant. What did I have to lose? I was fair, and rich, and well set up. And I wasn't that old. As my husbands always told me, I had the nicest pussy in England. I have got Mars in my heart, but Venus everywhere else. Venus gives me lust and lecherousness, but Mars grants me boldness. I was born under a good sign. So I ask you this. Why was love ever considered to be a sin? I have followed all my inclinations, by virtue of the constellations. I could no more withdraw my love from a handsome young man than I could disobey the stars. I will tell you something else. I have a red birthmark on my face, just where my hood hides it, and I have another one in a more private place.
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"So God be my judge I have never been discreet. I have never been backward. I have always followed my appetites. I didn’t mind if he was short or tall, black or white – if he liked me, I was on. I didn’t care if he was rich or poor, noble or serf, as long as I had him.

What else is there to say? At the end of the month, Jankyn was my new husband. We had a grand wedding. I gave him all my worldly goods, inherited from the previous four husbands. That is what marriage is all about. But, God, did I regret doing it! He was hard. He never let me do what I wanted. And he did beat me. Once I accidentally tore a page out of his book, and he went for me. He bashed me around the head so much that I became deaf in one ear. I still am. Yet I was stubborn. I was a lioness. And I had a loose tongue, too. He told me not to gossip in the neighbourhood, but I paid no attention to him. I still made my visits to Alison and the other dames. So then he began to preach at me, and cite all the ancient examples. There was one old Roman called Simplicius Gallus – I think that was his name – who left his wife for ever. What was her crime? One day he saw her standing on the doorstep with her head uncovered. Then there was another Roman who left his wife because she went to a midsummer revel without his permission. Can you believe it? Of course he quoted the Bible at me, too. He would recite that passage from Ecclesiastes which forbids men from letting their wives roam abroad. Then he would tell me this in a solemn voice: "A man cannot build a house with reeds. A man cannot ride a blind horse. It is even more foolish to have a wife that longs to go on pilgrimages. Such a man deserves to be hanged." What was I supposed to make of that? I made nothing of it. I ignored him. I despised his old sayings and proverbs. I was not going to be corrected by him. I hate anyone who tells me what my vices are. I’m sure that you all feel the same. This really made him mad, of course. But I was not going to put up with his whining.

‘Let me tell you what happened about this book. I tore a
page out of it, if you remember, and he beat me around the
head. As I said, I am still deaf in one ear. He read this book all the time, night and day. He said that it was written by Valerius and Theophrastus, and that it was an attack upon women. He loved it. He lapped it up. There were other books bound up in the same volume. There was some cardinal at Rome, called Saint Jerome, who had written an attack on someone called Jovinian. Don’t ask me what that was all about. Then there was a work by Tertullian, one by Chrysippus and one by Heloise who was an abbess near Paris. She was the one who ran after Abelard. I know all about her. Let me try to remember the other books. Oh yes. There was a copy of Solomon’s proverbs and a book called Ars Amatoria by Ovid. There they all were, collected together.

So he spent his time — when he wasn’t working, that is — reading and rereading these old books. He loved to pore over the stories of wicked wives. He knew more stories about them than any scholar. He was not so interested in tales of good wives, even if they came from the Bible. I know for a fact, in any case, that no priest will ever speak well of wives or even of women. Unless they are saints, of course, when they don’t really count as female. Who called the lion a savage beast? It certainly was not the lion itself. By God, if women had written the stories, instead of the monks in their cloisters, they would have made men so wicked that they would have been accursed sex. Scholars and lovers are miles apart. Those under the sway of Mercury love study and learning, while those in the power of Venus love love itself. They love to party. That is why there is such a difference in temperament. When Venus rises, Mercury falls. When Mercury is in the ascendant, Venus is desolate. So no priest will ever praise a woman. When these pious men are old, and can no more make love than my old boot, then they will sit down and complain that women cannot keep their marriage vows. What old dolts!

‘Let me get back to the point. I was about to tell you why Jankyn beat me up for meddling with his book. One evening the master of the house, as he liked to call himself, was sitting
by the fire and reading. He read out to me the story of Eve, through whose wickedness all humankind was brought into woe. Only Jesus could save us, when He purchased our redemption with His holy blood. That is clear evidence, Jankyn told me, that a woman was responsible for the fall of mankind. It is an old argument. Then he read to me the tale of how Sampson lost his hair. It was cut off by his mistress, Delilah, while he slept. As a result, he was captured and blinded by the Philistines. Then he told me the story of Hercules and Deianira, and how the shirt she wove him consumed him in flames. Jankyn was thorough. He did not forget the trouble that the two wives of Socrates caused him. And how one of them, Xantippa, had thrown piss into his face. The poor innocent man stayed very still, as if he were dead, and then just wiped his face with a cloth. All he said was— "After the thunder comes the rain."

'As soon as he had finished that story, he told me all about Pasiphae, queen of Crete. He thought it was an excellent example of mad lechery and bestiality. I don't want to think about it. It was all too horrible. She must have been mad. And there was Clytemnestra, who, for the sake of her adulterous lusts, murdered her husband. He read out her history with great pleasure. He lectured me about the reason Amphiorax of Argos met his death. He knew the whole story. He was betrayed by his wife, Eriphyle, who for a brooch of gold led the Greeks to the place where her husband was hiding. As a result, he died at the siege of Thebes. He was very indignant with Livia, wife of Sejanus, and with Lucia, wife of Lucretius. One killed her husband out of love, and the other out of hate. Livia poisoned her man, late one night, because he had become her enemy. Lucia, on the other hand, was so lecherous that she prepared an aphrodisiac for her husband. It was meant to ensure that he was besotted with her. But it was too powerful. He drank it and died before morning. Whatever way you look at it, the husbands come off worse. I am so sorry for them.

'That wasn't the end of it. Oh no. Jankyn told me about...
another Roman of old times, Latumyus, who complained to a friend of his that in his garden there grew a tree of sorrow. Apparently, three of his wives had hanged themselves from its branches. Out of spite, I imagine. This friend, Arrius, clapped him on the back and said, “Listen, mate, let me have a cutting from that tree. It sounds great. I’d love to have one in my garden.” Then Jankyn told me all about the wives that had killed their husbands in their beds. With the corpse lying on the floor, they would have sex in bed with another man. Other wives have driven nails into the brains of their husbands as they slept, while others have administered poison. He knew of more evil deeds than even I could imagine. And he knew more proverbs, too, than there are blades of grass or sands on the shore. “It is better,” he said, “to live with a lion or a dragon rather than a nagging woman. It is better to live on the roof than share your bed with a shrewish wife. These women are so cantankerous and contrary that they hold in contempt what their husbands hold dear.” That is what Jankyn said. You can imagine my reply. Then he told me another saying. “A woman casts off her shame when she takes off her dress.” Oh, and here’s another. “A good-looking women who has lost her virtue is like a gold ring in a sow’s nose.” Can you imagine how I felt? I was angry. I was in pain.

‘When I realized that he was going to carry on reading that book – all bloody night, if necessary – I lost it. I grabbed the book from his hands and tore three pages out of it. Then I punched him in the face so hard that he toppled back into the fire. He got up like a wild animal and knocked me down with his fist; it was a powerful blow, and I lay on the floor as if I were dead. When he saw how still I was lying he got scared and would have run away. Men are like that. But then quick as a flash I came round. “Oh false thief,” I whispered. “Have you finally killed me? Have you murdered me for the sake of my property? Oh Jankyn. Come to me. Let me kiss you before I die.”

‘That did it. He came over to me and kneeled down beside
Oh sweet Alison," he said. "So help me God, I shall never strike you again! You know yourself what I have done. Forgive me, dearest. Have pity on me, I beseech you!"

"Then I got up and hit him again. "Now we are quits," I said. "I can die in peace. These are my last words." They were not, of course, and eventually we made up with much sighing and crying. I had won. He gave me the reins and I took control of my house and property. I also ruled over his tongue—and over his fists. What do you think I did with that book? I made him burn it. When I had taken charge of the household he came up to me and said, "My own true wife, my Alison, do as you please for the rest of your life. Just preserve my honour and my standing."

"From that day forward we never had an argument. I swear to God that I became the best wife in the world. I was loyal to him, and he was true to me. I hope his soul is now at peace in a better world. Shall I tell you my story now?"

Biholde the wordes bitwen the Somonour and the Frere

The Friar laughed when he heard all this. "Now, ma dame," he said, "by God that was a long preamble to a tale!"

The Summoner was listening. "What do you think?" he asked the other pilgrims. "A friar will always be interfering. A friar is like a fly. He will alight on any dish and any meat. What is all this about preamble or perambulation, whatever you call it? Preamble yourself. Or trot, if you like. Or gallop ahead. You are spoiling our fun."

"Is that all you have to say, sir Summoner?" the Friar replied. "By God, before I leave you all, I will tell you a story about a summoner that will keep you in fits of laughter."

"Fuck you, Friar. Before we get to Sittingbourne I will have told two or three tales about your profession that will reduce you to tears. I can see that you have already lost your temper."
Harry Bailey intervened. 'Peace! No more squabbling. Let the woman begin her story. You two are behaving like drunk. Go on now, mistress, and tell us your tale.'

'I am ready, Mr Bailey. That is, if the worthy Friar here will let me continue.'

'Ma dame,' the Friar replied. 'Nothing would give me greater pleasure.'
The Wife of Bath’s Tale

Heere bigynneth the Tale of the Wyf of Bathe

In the good old days, in the time of blessed King Arthur, this island was filled with spirits. It was a magical land. The queen of the fairies danced over green mead and meadow, with all her elves and pixies in attendance. That was what people believed, in any case. It must have been hundreds of years ago, by my reckoning. Now we live in the modern world. We no longer see fairies. Do you know why? They have been chased away by monks and friars who are forever purifying and sanctifying the different parts of the country. These clericals seek out woods and streams; they spread out over the land as thick as specks of dust in the sunbeam. They bless the halls, the chambers, the kitchens and the bedrooms; they bless cities, towns, boroughs, castles and high towers; they bless villages, barns, stables and dairies. That is why there are no more fairies. The friars now tread upon the elvish paths, morning and evening, saying their matins and their other holy offices; where there were once pixies there are now prayers. Of course a woman can feel much safer, knowing that there won’t be an evil spirit beneath a bush or tree. She may meet a friar, of course. But he will take only her chastity, not her soul.

Once upon a time there was a knight at the court of King Arthur. One day this knight was riding by the riverside, without any company, when all at once he saw a young maid walking ahead of him. She was also alone. He took advantage of the situation, and raped her. She tried to fight him off, but she did not have the strength. This sinful deed caused such an
ordered the knight to be executed. He would have been beheaded, according to the law, were it not for the fact that the queen and the other ladies of the court pleaded for his life. They cried, 'Mercy! Mercy!' so long and so loudly that the king eventually gave in and delegated the decision to his wife. She would decide whether the knight lived or died.

The queen thanked her lord for his graciousness and, as soon as she found the opportunity, she called the knight to her. 'Your fate is in the balance,' she said to him. 'You cannot be certain of your life. The day of your doom may be nearer than you think. I will save you, if you can tell me one thing. What is it that women most desire? Be careful! Think before you speak. That is the only way you will be able to rescue your neck from the executioner's blade. If you cannot give me the answer today, I will give you permission to leave the court. Seek out the answer far and wide. Then return here in a year and a day. Before you go, you must give me your solemn pledge that you will come back and surrender yourself to the court.'

The knight sighed, filled with doubt and perplexity. How could he answer such a question? Yet he had no real choice in the matter. In the end he decided that he would obey the queen's command. He would leave the court and return within a year and a day. He put his faith in God to find the right course for him, and jumped on to his horse. He tried every town and village, looking for enlightenment. 'What is it,' he said to one and all, 'that women desire most?' However hard he tried, he could not find a suitable answer. No two people agreed on the subject. Some said that women loved money the most; some said that they prized honour, and others pleasure. Some said that women wanted gorgeous clothes, but others chose sex as the main dish. Some said that women loved to be married, and widowed, often. Some said that they liked to be married and looked after in luxury. The knight was told that a man could win a woman with flattery. Or that any woman, young or old, rich or poor, could be caught by fuss and attention.
1 criticism at court, that the king executed. He would have been law, were it not for the fact that of the court pleaded for his life, but so strong and so loudly that the decided the decision to his wife. The knight lived or died.

for his graciousness and, as soon lady, she called the knight to her, she said to him. ‘You cannot be of your doom may be nearer than they can tell me one thing. What is careful! Think before you speak. Be able to rescue your neck from you cannot give me the answer to leave the court. Seek out return here in a year and a day. me your solemn pledge that you yourself to the court.’

with doubt and perplexity. How on? Yet he had no real choice decided that he would obey the save the court and return within and in God to find the right course horse. He tried every town and ent. ‘What is it,’ he said to one post? ‘However hard he tried, he No two people agreed on the loved money the most, some and others pleasure. Some said clothes, but others chose sex as women loved to be married, and that they liked to be married the knight was told that a man. Or that any woman, young or right by fuss and attention.

Of course, there were others who claimed that us women really wanted our liberty. We wanted to do as we pleased, and not to be judged. I think there is a lot of truth in that. Who wants to be told that she is acting immodestly? I’ll tell you one thing. If women are attacked on a sensitive point, then they will hit back. Try it, and you will see. Even if we are vicious on the inside, we need to appear virtuous and wholesome.

There were other arguments. Some people told the knight that, above all else, women wished to seem discreet and trustworthy; they wanted to have a reputation for strength of mind, and for preserving secrets. That is rubbish, naturally. Women can never keep a secret. Have you heard the story of Midas?

According to Ovid and other learned writers, Midas had two great ass’s ears concealed beneath his long hair. He was terrified lest anyone should find out about his deformity. That would be the end. So no one knew anything about it, except his wife. He loved her, and he trusted her. So he told her to keep quiet about this – this unfortunate development. Could she do that? Could she hell! Of course she swore to him that she would lose everything in the world rather than reveal his secret. It would be evil, she said, to besmirch the honour of her dear husband. It would shame her, too, beyond reckoning. Yet she almost died with the effort of suppressing the truth; she was sure that she would burst, that the words would make their way out somehow. Do you know that feeling I do. She had promised to tell no one. So what was she to do? She ran down to some marshland near the house, her heart pounding, and put her mouth close to the reeds and the water just like a heron. ‘Now,’ she said to the water, ‘don’t betray me. Don’t repeat this. I am going to tell you something that I will never tell anyone else. My husband has the ears of an ass! God, I feel so much better now that I’ve said it. I am so relieved that I have let go of the secret.’ It just proves that we women cannot keep a confidence for very long. The words will pour out. If you want to learn the rest of the story, you will have to look it up in Ovid.
When the knight realized that he was never going to find an answer to the question – what do women love most – he felt ill at ease and unhappy. But the day for his return had come. He had to go home and attend the queen’s court. On his way back, full of care, he happened to ride through a forest. There, by the side of the track, he saw a most amazing spectacle. There were twenty-four or more young maidens dancing in a ring among the trees. He was drawn to them, in the hope that he might acquire some secret wisdom from this circle of young women. Yet as he came up to them, they vanished into thin air. The dance had gone. He looked around in bewilderment. It was then that he saw an old crone, sitting on the upturned trunk of a dead tree. He had never come across an uglier woman. ‘Sir knight,’ she said, ‘this is not the way for you. Tell me what you want here. What are you looking for? It may be that I can help you. Old women are sometimes wise women.’

‘Dear mother,’ the knight replied, ‘I will die unless I find the answer to one question. What is it that women desire most? If you could tell me the solution, I will forever be in your debt.’

‘Give me your word then. Take my hand and swear. If I provide you with the answer, then you must do whatever I require of you. Anything within your power. If you agree, then I will tell you the secret before nightfall.’

‘I plight to you my oath as a knight,’ he said.

‘Then I am sure that your life is safe. Trust me. I have no doubt at all that the queen will agree with me about this. The proudest of all the great ladies, with all their jewels and fine headgear, will not dare to contradict me.’ Then she whispered some words into his ear. ‘Come now,’ she added, more loudly. ‘Be happy. Be confident. Let’s travel on to the court without delay.’

When they arrived at the palace, the knight attended the queen as he had promised her. He announced that he had an answer to the burning question. You can imagine the excitement among all the women. The wives, the paramours, the maids, the widows, all came to the court. The queen was there,
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too, ready to give judgement before the assembly. Everyone was waiting to hear what he would say. The queen called for silence, and then ordered the knight to come forward. ‘Tell us now, gentle knight,’ she asked him, ‘what is your answer? What do women desire most?’

The knight did not hang his head, like a beast in its stall. He stepped forward and, before them all, responded to her in a ringing voice. ‘My liege, my lady, women desire to have sovereignty over their husbands and over their lovers. They wish to dominate them. Kill me if you wish. But that is the truth. I stand here before you. Do with me as you will.’

There was a general murmur of approval. Not a wife or widow or virgin disagreed with what he said. They all concurred that he had won his life. As soon as this was clear, the old crone came forward. ‘Justice!’ she called. ‘Justice, sovereign queen! Before the court disperses, listen to my plea. I was the one who taught this answer to the knight. I made him swear an oath that, in return, he would grant me any wish that lay within his power. I vow to you that I am telling the truth. Now that I have saved his life, the time has come.’ She turned to face him. ‘Now, sir knight, I ask that you marry me without delay. I wish to be your wife.’

He looked at her in horror. ‘Oh my God! Is that it? How can I? I admit that I did swear an oath to you. But for God’s sake ask for something else. Take all my money. Anything. But don’t take my body.’

‘No way. I will not betray myself, or you. I may be foul and old and poor, but I don’t want your money. I would not part with you for all the gold in the world. I only want your love.’

‘My love? No. My ruin. My despair. I am to be degraded and disgraced.’

He complained in vain. It was determined that he must marry this old woman. He was also obliged to go to bed with her. I wish that I could tell you all about the happy festivities and the joyful ceremonies that accompanied the union. But I can’t. There were none. There were no speeches of
congratulation, no toasts, no wedding cake. There were, instead, expressions of sorrow and pity. He married her secretly the next morning, and then hid himself from the light of day like an owl. He could not look at her, ugly and dirty as she was. When eventually he got into bed with his new wife, he was disgusted and ashamed; he turned and twisted beneath the sheets, while she just lay there with a smile on her face. ‘Oh husband dear,’ she said. ‘Bless me! Is this the way that knights treat their new brides? Is this the household law of King Arthur? Is everyone of your rank so shy? I am the love of your life, your own wife. I am the woman who saved you. I have never done you any harm. I know that much. So why are you behaving like this on our first night together? You are writhing like a madman. What is my crime? Tell me, for God’s sake. If I can amend it, I will do so.’

‘Amend it? I don’t think so. There is nothing you can do about it. You are old. You are ugly. You come from such low stock that it is little wonder that I twist and turn. My lineage is besmirched! I wish to God that my heart would break!’

‘Is that the only reason for your distress?’

‘Only! What do you think?’

‘Well, sir, I think I can cure it. I think I may do you a service, in a day or two if necessary. If you showed me a little bit more consideration, I might help you out. But please don’t go on about your high rank. You get your lineage from old money. That is all. It isn’t worth a damn. It is sheer conceit. You should be more concerned with human virtue. You should give more consideration to those who perform good works, in private and in public. They are the real gentlemen. Our Saviour tells us that true nobility comes from His example, not from the money bags of our rich ancestors. Although they may give us all of their worldly goods, from which we claim good breeding, they cannot bequeath to us the gift of holy living. An honest man is made by honest deeds. That is the only lesson your forefathers can impart to you.’

‘I suppose you know the high words of the Florentine poet,
Dante, who taught us this sentence - "A man cannot climb heavenward on his own slender branches. God wills us to claim from Him our strength and purpose." The only things we can inherit from our ancestors are material goods that in fact may harm or injure us. Everyone knows this as well as I do. If virtue were of natural growth in certain families, proceeding down the line from parent to child, then they could do nothing but good. It would be impossible for them to be caught in villainy or vice.

'Take a piece of fire. Carry it into the darkest house between here and the Caucasian mountains. Shut the doors upon it and depart. The fire will keep on burning, pure and unsullied, just as if twenty thousand people were observing it. It will perform its natural function until it expires. I stake my life upon it. So now you may understand what I have been telling you. Gentility cannot be borrowed or purchased. Fire is always and forever fire. Men are of more mixed natures, susceptible to change. God knows it happens often enough that the son of a nobleman behaves shamefully. There are some who make great play of their ancestry, and of their virtuous grandfathers and great-grandfathers, but who themselves are only notable as villains. They are not like their ancestors at all. A man may call himself a lord or an earl but, in reality, he is a sot and a churl. Nobility is the renown won by others who came before you. It does not belong to you by right of birth. God alone can grant you virtue. God alone is the source and spring of grace.

'Valerius Maximus was a Roman author. Have you heard of him? He praises the nobility of Tullius Hostilius, who rose from poverty to become the third king of Rome. That Hostilius was a real gentleman. Seneca, and Boethius, both teach us that gentle natures are seen in gentle deeds.

'And therefore, dear husband, I conclude as follows. Even if my ancestors were humble, I hope by the grace of God and by my own efforts to lead a virtuous life. When I choose virtue, and eschew sin, then I will be a gentlewoman. And do you blame me for my poverty? Did not the Saviour, the incarnate
will surely know that Jesus, king of heaven, would not have made a bad or sinful choice. Seneca and other philosophers tell us that cheerful and willing poverty is a great blessing. Whoever is satisfied with a slender purse, even though he does not have a shirt on his back, I hold rich indeed. He who is greedy is wretched; he longs for that which he cannot have. He that has nothing, and wants nothing, is a man of wealth; you may call him a knave, but I call him a spiritual knight. Poverty sings. You may know that quotation from Juvenal, to the effect that the poor man whistles and dances before thieves. Poverty may seem hateful but it is in truth a blessing. It encourages hard work. It teaches the wise man patience. It teaches the patient man wisdom. It may seem miserable. It may be a state no one wishes. But it brings us closer to God. It brings us self-knowledge. Poverty is the eyeglass through which we see our true friends. So therefore, dear husband, cease your complaining. I have done you no harm. Do not rebuke me for my poverty.

"But then you tell me that I am old. I don’t know whether it is taught in any learned books, but I always believed that gentlemen were meant to reverence old age. You call an old man “father”, do you not? I am sure that I could find many authors who say so. Why, then, do you call me “foul” and “ancient”? At least you will not be a cuckold. Age and ugliness are the best guardians of chastity in existence. Nevertheless I know that you have a good appetite. I will satisfy it as best I can. So choose now one of two things. You can have me old and ugly until I die, in which case I will be your humble and faithful wife obedient in everything. Or you can have me young and beautiful, in which case you can expect many visitors in the house; the crowd may flock to another warm place, too, but I leave that to your imagination. Which will it be? Choose now and forever hold your peace."

The knight thought about this and could not make up his mind. He sighed, and shook his head, and sighed again. Finally
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Heere endeth the Wyves Tale of Bathe